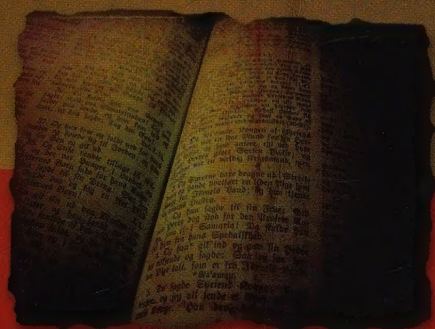


ROLLAND MCCUNE



A
SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY

OF BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY

VOLUME ONE

David B. Douglass

A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY
OF BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY

*Volume 1: Prolegomena and the Doctrines
of Scripture, God, and Angels*

ROLLAND MCCUNE

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PREFACE

The field of systematic theology has held a particular fascination for me since the later 1950s when I graduated from college and entered seminary. My skilled theology instructor, the late Dr. Alva J. McClain, was a master teacher who not only fueled my thirst for theology but also further honed my desire to see Scripture's bigger doctrinal picture in all its facets.

Inevitably, influential teachers leave expressions, ideas and suggestions that are impossible to document fifty years later. To Dr. McClain's influence, I would confess my own work's debt. But I would also add that teachers are not responsible for all their students' conclusions, especially in so vast a field as Christian theology. I alone bear responsibility for what I have written.

After majoring in Old Testament and systematic theology in seminary, I have been privileged to teach in these areas for forty-two years on the seminary level, over thirty of which have been devoted to systematic theology and apologetics exclusively. To me theology is still the "Queen of the Sciences," gathering into its domain all the fruits of biblical studies.

Finally, I should express my heartfelt gratitude to the Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, its president, Dr. David M. Doran, and its governing board for significantly reducing my teaching load in order to work on this volume. Also my special thanks to Jared Compton, Dan Huffstutler, Dan Winnberg, and Joel Compton for their help in getting the manuscript ready for the press.

Rolland D. McCune

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ABBREVIATIONS

Bibles

KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

Commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and lexicons

BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1906.
EDBT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by H. Balz and G. Schneider. ET. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1993.
EDT ¹	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i> . Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
EDT	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i> . Edited by Walter A. Elwell. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

- IDB *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
- ISBE *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley. 4 vols. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–1988.
- NBD *New Bible Dictionary*. Edited by J. D. Douglas, N. Hillyer, and D. R. W. Wood. 3rd ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996.
- NDT *New Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Sinclair Ferguson and David F. Wright. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988.
- NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
- NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament
- NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by W. A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
- PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentary
- TWOT *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Edited by R. L. Harris and G. L. Archer, Jr. 2 vols. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

Journals

BETS	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CSR	<i>Christian Scholar's Review</i>
DBSJ	<i>Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
GTJ	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
TJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TMSJ	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
TSFB	<i>The Theological Students' Fellowship Bulletin</i>
VE	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

Part 1



PROLEGOMENA

Chapter 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

THE IDEA OF THEOLOGY

Etymologically, *theology* comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word), which suggest the “word concerning God” or “the study of God.” Systematic or Christian Theology then, in the widest sense, is simply doctrine—the doctrine(s) of the Bible set forth according to plan or order. *Theology Proper* is the subset of systematic theology that discusses the person and work of God.

Here a listing of other theologians’ definitions is helpful in giving a general sense of the scope of this discipline and a means of comparison and contrast with the definition given above.

- ♦ **A. H. Strong:** “Theology is the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”¹
- ♦ **Charles Hodge:** “Theology, therefore, is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”²

¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 1.

² *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960), 1:19.

- ♦ **William G. T. Shedd:** “Theology is a science that is concerned with both the infinite and the finite, with both God and the Universe. The material, therefore, which it includes is vaster than that of any other science. It is also the most necessary of all the sciences.”³
- ♦ **Lewis S. Chafer:** “Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.”⁴
- ♦ **James L. Garrett:** “The ordered exposition of Christian doctrines.”⁵
- ♦ **Millard Erickson:** “That discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, and related to issues of life.”⁶
- ♦ **Wayne Grudem:** “[Theology is] any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.”⁷
- ♦ **Robert L. Reymond:** “[Systematic Theology] in its broad sense speaks of intellectual or rational discourse about God or things divine.”⁸
- ♦ **Stanley Grenz:** “[Theology] is the believing community’s intellectual reflection on faith.”⁹

³ *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), p. 51.

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), 1:6.

⁵ *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–95), 1:10.

⁶ *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 23.

⁷ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 21.

⁸ *A New Systematic of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. xxv.

⁹ *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 81. Grenz defines it this way because, in his judgment, Scripture is the preserved memory of the “foundational events” between God and man along with the (faith) responses to the

THE AIM OF THEOLOGY

In simplest terms, the aim of systematic theology is the correlation of the various teachings or doctrines found in the Bible. Biblical truths once discerned are subsequently organized systematically by theme or topic. By doing this, systematic theology works on the assumption that the revelation of God in Scripture is inherently *systemic* and thus able to be *systematized*. (In fact, Wayne Grudem notes that the alternative would be “disorganized theology,”¹⁰ which unfortunately characterizes much of what goes by the name of systematic or even biblical theology today.) Many theologians’ aims assume this inherent systematic nature of Scripture; however, in doing theology, some move beyond the correlation of simply *biblical* truths to the integration of a great deal of extra-biblical material, particularly philosophy. This trend is evident in the first set of the following citations. The second set gives examples of those taking a more narrowly-focused approach:

Examples of Broad Aims

- ♦ **A. H. Strong** says that “the aim of theology is the ascertainment of the facts respecting God and the relations between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth.”¹¹

revelation of God in Christ (p. 77). Grenz here represents the avant-garde, post-conservative evangelicalism. An even more recent post-conservative movement is depicted in Robert E. Webber’s *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

¹⁰ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 23–25.

¹¹ *Systematic Theology*, p. 2.

- ♦ **William G. T. Shedd** says that “systematic theology aims to exhibit the logical order and connection of the truths of revelation.”¹²
- ♦ **John Murray** says that “the task of systematic theology is to set forth in orderly and coherent manner the truth respecting God and His relations to men and the world.”¹³
- ♦ **James L. Garrett** lists seven “roots” or reasons for systematic theology: (1) “Systematic theology is necessary as a proper extension of the teaching function of the Christian church. . . . This may be called the *catechetical* root.” (2) “Systematic theology is necessary for the orderly or integrated formulation of biblical truth. This may be called the *exegetical* root.” (3) “Systematic theology is necessary for the accurate clarification, the proper undergirding, and the helpful amplification of the gospel message which ought to be preached by Christian preachers and indeed of the total proclamation of the Word of God by all the people of God. This is the *homiletical* root.” (4) “Systematic theology is necessary for the defense of Christian truth against error within the church or from quasi-Christian movements. This is the *polemical* root.” (5) “Systematic theology is necessary in view of Christianity’s cultural context—either in response to the challenge of a leading philosophy in a given era, in response to the entire cultural situation of the time, or in response to questions about ultimate reality allegedly posed by humankind. Each of these [are aspects] of the *apologetic* root.” (6) “Systematic theology is

¹² *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 51.

¹³ “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols., ed. Iain H. Murray (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–1982), 4:1. Murray goes on to say that systematic theology is not revelation, nor alongside revelation, but is a duty and necessity which revelation imposes.

necessary as the essential foundation for the interpretation and application of Christian ethics, both personal and social. This is the *ethical* root.” (7) “Systematic theology is necessary for the more effective propagation of the Christian gospel among all human beings in all nations and for the proper encounter of Christianity with major non-Christian religions. These are the *missionary* and the *dialogic* roots of systematic theology.”¹⁴

- ♦ Stanley Grenz insists the theology must be contextualized, thus moving it beyond traditional “evangelical propositionalism”¹⁵ and situating theology in the context of general culture, where it can serve a practical purpose.¹⁶ In short, for Grenz, theology must “[relate] to life and practice in the Christian community.”¹⁷

Examples of More Narrow Aims

- ♦ **Robert L. Reymond** says theology refers to “the intelligent effort which seeks to understand the Bible, viewed as revealed truth, as a coherent whole.”¹⁸ Reymond fills this out in another place, saying, “The systematic theologian, viewing the Scriptures as a completed revelation, seeks to understand holistically the plan, purpose, and didactic intention of the divine mind in Holy Scripture, and to

¹⁴ “Why Systematic Theology?” CSR 3 (1989): 259–81.

¹⁵ *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, p. 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74. Interestingly enough, it was this desire for contextualization which led Clark Pinnock to call for a postmillennial theology. This position, he claimed, would “legitimate rather than discourage the work of cultural reclamation we are already starting to engage in” (“Erickson’s Three-Volume *Magnum Opus*,” TSFB 9 [1986]: 30).

¹⁸ “The Justification of Theology with a Special Application to Contemporary Christology,” *Presbyterian* 12 (1986): 1.

arrange that plan, purpose, and didactic intention in orderly and coherent fashion as articles of the Christian faith.”¹⁹

- ♦ **J. Gresham Machen** says that systematic theology “seeks to set forth, no longer in the order of the time when it was revealed . . . but in the order of logical relationships, the grand sum of what God has told us in his Word.”²⁰
- ♦ **Klaus Bockmuehl** says that systematic theology is the “summary or synopsis of the themes of teaching in Holy Scripture.” He further states that the theologian should “collect the different, dispersed propositions on essential themes or topics of the OT and the NT and put them together in an order that fits the subject-matter in hand.”²¹
- ♦ **Herman Bavinck**, using the older term *dogmatics*, gives the following definition of theology’s aim:

The imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God’s thoughts after him and to trace their unity. His work is not finished until he has mentally absorbed this unity and set it forth in dogmatics. Accordingly, he does not come to God’s revelation with a ready-made system in order, as best he can, to force its content into it. On the contrary, even in his system a theologian’s sole responsibility is to think God’s thoughts after him and to reproduce the unity that is objectively present

¹⁹ *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, pp. xxv–xxvi.

²⁰ “Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan” (inaugural lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, September 25, 1929), quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. xxvi.

²¹ “The Task of Systematic Theology,” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 4.

in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture. That such a unity exists in the knowledge of God contained in revelation is not open to doubt; to refuse to acknowledge it would be to fall into skepticism, into a denial of the unity of God.²²

THE POSSIBILITY OF THEOLOGY

While on the surface it may seem relatively simple to *do* theology, such a possibility itself, however, rests on a theological basis. Norman Geisler includes in his lengthy prolegomena no fewer than eleven “preconditions” necessary to producing a systematic theology.²³ For Geisler, these preconditions form the rational basis for making an evangelical theology and, as such, reflect the view that systematics must be preceded by philosophy and apologetics. In his opinion, these eleven rubrics must be satisfied *before* an appeal to the Bible can be made. In other words, a correct worldview must be independently built and validated before a biblical superstructure of correlated themes and topics can be viably constructed.

This worldview that Geisler and others like him attempt to lay is actually founded upon an *a priori* commitment to reason. For example, in Geisler’s approach, *general* theism must be intellectually justified prior to any discussion of *Christian* theism. Fundamentally, truth must be

²² *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–), 1:44–45.

²³ *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 1:17–225.

epistemologically settled before addressing *divine* truth claims. In the end, systematic theology rests on the prior conclusions of autonomous, free-from-the-Bible (and, ultimately, free-from-God) human reason—not Scripture's claims about itself. It is only by charting this course that Geisler and others feel they can avoid the inherent circularity which adheres to the epistemic systems of those proving Christianity with Christian truth claims. However, as will be shown, the general theism this tack posits is not biblical theism, and its *a priori* commitment to reason is itself inherently circular.

Before proceeding, though, it is helpful to note how a few other theologians have reflected on the possibility of theology.

- ♦ **Herman Bavinck** notes correctly that to have dogmatics God must “exist to the mind of the believer, must reveal himself, and hence to some extent must be knowable.”²⁴
- ♦ **J. I. Packer** holds that theology rests on two ideas: (1) “The concept of human beings as made in God’s image, so that they can reason . . . as God himself does.” (2) “The concept of the Bible as the word of God.”²⁵
- ♦ **Harold O. J. Brown** says that four things characterize a science and are applicable to theology. The first three are useful for the present discussion: “(1) A real object of study [i.e., in theology, this is God], (2) a means of study appropriate to that object [i.e., faith and trust in God], (3) a systematic procedure for carrying out that

²⁴ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:285.

²⁵ “Is Systematic Theology a Mirage? An Introductory Discussion,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), p. 25.

study [i.e., God's self-disclosure in the Bible with the consultation of tradition]."²⁶

- ♦ **A. H. Strong**, in similar fashion, holds that the possibility of theology has a threefold ground: (1) the "actual existence of the object"; (2) "the subjective capacity of the mind to know that object"; and (3) "the provision of definite means by which the object is brought into contact with the mind."²⁷

What is suggested in the following is that the possibility of doing theology actually rests on three *scripturally*-revealed truths.²⁸

The Existence of a God Who Has Relations with the Universe

The Bible's first words demonstrate the assumption that God exists and has relations with the universe: "In the beginning *God*" (Gen 1:1). God is, therefore, a proper object of knowledge, even though He is adequately apprehended only by faith. To be sure, God *can* be apprehended without faith; this is the arena of natural theology (a human construct of general revelation made possible by the image of God in man). In this arena, true knowledge of God is possible, being both universally revealed and universally apprehended; however, this knowledge is also universally rejected due to humanity's total, moral depravity (Rom 1:19–21, 28). Therefore, the faith which mediates a true apprehension is a faith that is

²⁶ "On Methods and Means in Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), p. 154.

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, p. 2.

²⁸ This approach follows Strong's three-fold paradigm. For similar discussions, see Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 85; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:335ff.; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), pp. 25ff.

inescapably cognitive, comprising revealed knowledge. And, this faith also involves certitude. One can be convinced he truly knows God (Heb 11:1).

The Capacity of the Human Mind for Knowing God

Man's rational capacity—his ability to *know*—owes to his being made in the image of God (Gen 1:26, 27). He has the innate capacity both to know and to correlate certain truths about God (Rom 1:19, 20, 21). While God remains finally incomprehensible, man's knowledge of Him is nevertheless true, if still finite and colored by depravity.

God's Revelation of Himself

As will be noted in due course, God's self-disclosure came through seven channels: (1) creation; (2) the nature and constitution of man; (3) direct revelation; (4) God's mighty acts, comprising miracles and providence; (5) the lives of God's people; (6) the Bible; and (7) the Lord Jesus Christ.

In short, doing theology is possible because God exists and has revealed Himself and has given humans the capacity to know both of these things.

THE SOURCE OF THEOLOGY

The True Source of Theology

As was demonstrated above, theologians differ markedly over the aim of, and thus the source material for, doing systematic theology. It is

contended here that the only legitimate source is God's self-disclosure in the Bible (i.e., the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon). Such an arrowy-defined field does not preclude material deduced or inferred from Scripture by the right use of reason. Robert D. Culver helpfully explains that while Scripture is the only *source* for doctrine, the *resources* for extracting its truths are several, including reason.²⁹ Bavinck agrees, saying that "dogmatics has the right to rationally absorb [Scripture's] content and, guided by Scripture, to rationally process it and also to acknowledge as truth that which can be deduced from it by lawful inference."³⁰ In other words, while the source is singular, the theologian's cognitive powers are legitimate and necessary tools in distilling its meaning.

Warrant for limiting theology's source to Scripture is given by Scripture itself, with both the Old Testament prophets and the apostles appealing to Scripture as the only, ultimate, and most primitive authority. A few representative examples will suffice. When Israel was inclined to listen to occult babbles for theological information, God calls her back to the true standard for doing theology—the Scriptures—saying, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa 8:20).³¹ Jesus appeals to the Scripture when encountering Satan in the temptation experience. In each solicitation, Jesus refutes Satan with the theology of the written covenant (Matt 4:4, 6, 7). Further, Paul combats Jewish legalism by anathematizing any who would appeal to an authority other than his own God-revealed theology (Gal

²⁹ *Systematic Theology, Biblical and Historical* (Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005), p. xv.

³⁰ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:45. Grudem similarly says that deductions are viable "so long as they do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 34).

³¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). Furthermore, unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural emphasis is the author's own.

1:8). In fact, in another place, Paul describes the Scriptures as the product of the creative breath of God (*theopneustos*) and, consequently, as profitable for every facet of the Christian experience, including formulating correct theology (2 Tim 3:16–17). Peter too recognizes the unique authority of Scripture, valuing its testimony over eyewitness reports (2 Pet 1:16–21).

Not surprisingly, not all theologians are convinced that the Scriptures alone are the sole fountain for systematic theology:

- ♦ **Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest** call Scripture the “primary,” though not the sole, source of theology and propose an “integrative” theology that draws upon general and special revelation,³² including humanity, history and nature, as well as Christ and the Bible.
- ♦ **Millard Erickson** likewise says that systematic theology is based “primarily” on the Scripture.³³
- ♦ **Norman Geisler** also suggests that general revelation is a source for systematic theology. In fact, Geisler says that when general and special revelation are in conflict “priority should generally be given to the interpretation that is more certain. Sometimes this is our understanding of special revelation, and sometimes it is our understanding of general revelation, depending on which one is more thoroughly proven.”³⁴ Geisler further says that “in theology the interaction between biblical studies and other disciplines should always be a two-way street. . . . Those in biblical studies must listen

³² Scripture is given the “primary” role in their system because it is inerrant. To them, then, it is their “final court of appeal” (Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 1:25, 28–29).

³³ *Christian Theology*, p. 23.

³⁴ *Systematic Theology*, 1:78.

to as well as speak to the other disciplines.”³⁵ He then says that “it is the task of the Christian theologian to appropriate the information from [God’s revelation in His world and His word] and to form a worldview that includes a theocentric interpretation of science, history, human beings, and the arts. . . . Without question, in building a solid systematic theology both special revelation and general revelation are necessary.”³⁶

- ♦ **John Murray** says that the “chief source of revelation” for theology is the special revelation of God in Scripture. He claims that “all other departments of theological discipline contribute their findings to systematic theology and it brings all the wealth of knowledge derived from these disciplines to bear upon the more inclusive systematization which it undertakes.”³⁷
- ♦ **Gerhard Hasel** suggests that theology draws from history, psychology, sociology and philosophy, among others, “as long as such information is subject to the norms of biblical revelation and its truth claims.”³⁸
- ♦ **Clark Pinnock** believes the gospel should be the beginning point for systematic theology, not the Bible and revelation. He implies by this that the Bible derives its authority from the gospel. By doing this, Pinnock admits that he hopes to set a new agenda for doing

³⁵ Ibid., 1:79; see also pp. 91, 96, 219, 221, 223.

³⁶ Ibid., 1:79.

³⁷ “Systematic Theology,” 4:2. For Murray, then, natural or general revelation is part of the data with which systematic theology deals, though, to be fair, he affirms that it is not an *independent* locus.

³⁸ “The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” TJ 5 (1984): 127.

theology, rooting the endeavor in the experience of the new birth based on the gospel and subsequent reflection from there.³⁹

- ♦ **Stanley Grenz**, among others, follows Pinnock's tack. Grenz puts the matter somewhat circuitously, contending that "central to evangelicalism is a common vision of the faith that arises out of a common religious experience couched within a common interpretive framework consisting in theological beliefs we gain from Scripture."⁴⁰ Grenz says in another place: "Basically, systematic theology is the reflection on and the ordered articulation of faith. Hence, the reality of faith itself—our commitment to God revealed in Christ—calls for theological reflection."⁴¹
- ♦ **Randy Maddox**, commenting on the theology of feminism, says that such an inclusive theology must draw on the widest possible range of sources. "At the very least," he says, "these would include Scripture, experience, tradition, and reason."⁴²
- ♦ **A. H. Strong** says that "God himself, in the last analysis, must be the only source of knowledge with regard to his own being and relations. Theology is therefore a summary and explanation of the content of God's self-revelations."⁴³ These "self-revelations" then

³⁹ "Erickson's Three-Volume *Magnum Opus*," p. 30.

⁴⁰ *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, p. 34.

⁴¹ *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 1.

⁴² "Toward An Inclusive Theology: The Systematic Implications of the Feminist Critique," *CJR* 16 (1986): 7–23.

⁴³ Strong's ethical monism may figure in here. He defines ethical monism as that which "holds that the universe, instead of being one with God and coterminous with God, is but a finite, partial and progressive manifestation of the divine Life" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 107; see also pp. 109, 110, 131, 311, 337, 677, 843). Strong was never able to shed the charge of pantheism or, better expressed, his having confused the biblical, absolute distinction between the Creator and the creature.

would appear to transcend the written word. He says in another place that “the universe is a source of theology.”⁴⁴

- ♦ **William Newton Clark**, an early liberal, answers the question of where Christian theology finds its materials this way: “Anywhere. It should learn from any teacher that can teach it, and receive light from any source.”⁴⁵

The above are, in the main, too broad. Again, while there are at least seven channels of God’s self-revelation, only one of them is properly the source of systematic theology—the written Word of God. This is to say, the Bible includes the revelation from these other sources, but it also alone gives their correct interpretation.

False Sources of Theology

Having looked at the *true* source for theology, it is helpful to look at a few blind alleys theologians of the past and present have alternatively suggested.

Nature and Natural Theology

Natural theology is a legitimate human construct of natural revelation (or, general revelation in nature). However, while there is a revelation of God in nature (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19–20) and while this revelation does reveal something about His attributes (Rom 1:20), this revelation does not provide primary source material for systematic theology. The chief reason for this is that natural revelation is not propositional in *form*, even

⁴⁴ *Systematic Theology*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ *An Outline of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), pp. 10–11. He does, however, admit that the “chief source” will be Christian revelation.

though it is propositional in *content*. That is, while natural revelation does convey truth about God (i.e., it tells of “the glory of God” and declares “the work of His hands”), it does so inaudibly (Ps 19:3: “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard”).

Therefore, it is impossible to construct an authoritative theology on material that is not propositional in content *and* form. Rather, one relies on Scripture to clarify (authoritatively) nature’s propositions. As such, one cannot construct a systematic theology from natural revelation.⁴⁶

Some of Geisler’s eleven “preconditions” for doing theology also turn out to be sources to be consulted for the theological enterprise and, as such, are what are considered here to be invalid materials. His appeal, for example, to general or natural revelation for constructing systematic theology betrays a “double-revelation” theory. This theory postulates two equally fruitful mines for the ore of theology, namely the book of nature and the book of Scripture.⁴⁷ Each of these books has its own special clarity and God-ordained interpretive specialist. When an impasse is reached between the two authorities, the counsel is that priority should generally be given to the interpretive specialist that has the best propaedeutic on the issue at hand. This double-revelation dichotomy constructs a parity (at best) in theological authority and undermines the sole authority of Scripture for faith and practice.

⁴⁶ Cornelius Van Til correctly notes that one cannot even *begin* a search for God through natural revelation, let alone develop a legitimate systematic theology (see his “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946], pp. 263–301).

⁴⁷ For an explication and refutation of the double-revelation theory, see John C. Whitcomb, *The Origin of the Solar System* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964).

Rationalism

Not only is natural revelation an illegitimate source for systematic theology, so too is rationalism. Strong's description of rationalism implies why: "Rationalism . . . holds reason to be the ultimate source of all religious truth, while Scripture is authoritative only so far as its revelations agree with previous conclusions of reason, or can be rationally demonstrated."⁴⁸ J. I. Packer correctly says that reason must, instead, be subservient to Scripture:

Reason's part is to act as the servant of the written Word, seeking dependence on the Spirit to interpret Scripture scripturally, to correlate its teaching and to discern its application to all parts of life. We may not look to reason to tell us whether Scripture is right in what it says (reason is not in any case competent to pass such a judgment); instead, we must look to Scripture to tell us whether reason is right in what it thinks on the subjects with which Scripture deals.⁴⁹ Therefore, while man's rational powers are God-endowed to enable him to receive divine revelation, to apply it to the whole of life and to communicate it to others, they are neither the source of nor tests for divine revelation.

Theologians, both past⁵⁰ and (relatively) present,⁵¹ have tended to concede far too much to human reason. In fact, at points, some

⁴⁸ *Systematic Theology*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: *Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 48; also see pp. 126–45. Culver states it equally well, saying, "Faith appropriates revealed truth; reason organizes and systematizes it" (*Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, p. 24).

⁵⁰ Included here would be Francis Turretin, A. H. Strong, Charles Hodge, W. G. T. Shedd, Louis Berkhof, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. and H. C. Thiessen.

⁵¹ Included here would be the recent rational and semi-rational apologists such as Bernard Ramm, E. J. Carnell, Clark Pinnock, Francis Schaeffer, Gordon Lewis, Gordon Clark, Stuart Hackett and John Warwick Montgomery.

theologians' use of reason borders on rationalism itself. For example, Lewis and Demarest draw on "interrelated criteria of truth" and insist that they will "[accept] only those hypotheses that *upon testing* [emphasis added] are discovered to be non-contradictory, supported by adequate evidence, and affirmable without hypocrisy."⁵² Geisler argues similarly, as noted above, placing reason as the "rational precondition" for doing theology.⁵³ Though all three claim to avoid rationalism, they nonetheless still assert that reason must construct an independent grid before coming to special revelation, an assertion certainly resembling rationalism. Geisler's conclusion bears this out:

Systematic theology begins with an inductive study of both special revelation (in the Bible) and general revelation (in nature), it makes deductions from them, and these are put together in a unified and systematic whole. *Without logic this would not be possible; hence philosophy (especially logic) is truly the handmaid of theology* [emphasis added].⁵⁴

The main problems with a rational or semi-rational approach are the following: (1) It ignores the depravity of the human mind (Rom 8:5–8; 1 Cor 2:14); (2) relatedly, it ignores the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God and the Creator-creature relationship—that is, man's finiteness,⁵⁵ virtually assuming the omniscience of the human mind.⁵⁶

⁵² *Integrative Theology*, 1:25.

⁵³ *Systematic Theology*, 1:81–96.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ In fact, Geisler says that "God is subject to the law of noncontradiction just as we are" (*ibid.*, p. 161).

⁵⁶ On a more practical and subtle plane, theology is often drawn from or influenced by philosophy—systematized reason. History points this up. For example, many church fathers were Neo-Platonists (3rd–6th centuries A.D.). Thomas Aquinas (13th century A.D.) was Aristotelian. Many 18th century theologians bought into various Enlightenment philosophies. A large majority of theologians in the last two centuries have been influenced by Immanuel Kant in one form or another. And a more recent strand

Mysticism

Another false source of theology is mysticism.⁵⁷ Again, Strong's definition is masterful: "Mysticism . . . [holds] to the attainment of religious knowledge by direct communication from God, and by passive absorption of the human activities into the divine."⁵⁸ Hodge gives a more elaborate definition:

In theology . . . those who ignore or reject the divine guidance of the Scriptures, and assume to be led by an inward divine influence into the knowledge and obedience of the truth, are properly called Enthusiasts. This term, however, has been in a great measure superseded by the word Mystics. . . . Hence, in the wide sense of the word, Mystics are those who claim to be under the immediate guidance of God or of his Spirit.⁵⁹ In short, mysticism bypasses the Scriptures and makes the intellect virtually passive.⁶⁰

Mysticism as a source is rejected because it has no objective standard or restraints. Each mystic's experience is generally unique and forms

of theologians posits what is billed as liberation theology, which turns out to be a theology imbibing Marxism. In the end none of these philosophies produces a truly biblical theology.

⁵⁷ Good analyses of this subject can be found in the following places: Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:61–103; B. B. Warfield, "Mysticism and Christianity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel C. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), pp. 445–62; Arthur Johnston, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody, 1988).

⁵⁸ *Systematic Theology*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ *Systematic Theology*, 1:61. As D. D. Martin also notes, "Mysticism seeks to describe an experiential, direct, nonabstract, unmediated, loving knowing of God, and a knowing or seeing so direct as to be called union with God" (*EDT*, s.v. "Mysticism," p. 806).

⁶⁰ Of course mysticism as a source of theology must be distinguished from the illumination of the Holy Spirit (to be discussed further below)—the regeneration of the mind—which results in the significance (in contrast to the meaning) of biblical revelation becoming personally intelligible. This illumination begins at the new birth and always works through the Scriptures and with the human mind.

his own authority, which self-evidently works against the very task of *systematizing* theology.⁶¹

Experience

A related false source to mysticism is experience. Those doing theology rooted in this source will often tacitly insist that something must be true because they have experienced it. For example, many mainline Wesleyan and Pentecostal groups, as well as those under the general umbrella of the charismatic movement, appeal to certain experiences as the end all of argumentation and debate regarding the continuation of miraculous gifts or other theological matters.⁶² A similar line of thought undergirds much of the current discussion on demonology. One notable example is Merrill Unger, who originally held that Christians could not be demon possessed only to later change course as a result of the experiences and accounts of certain missionaries.⁶³ Kurt Koch provides a similar example.⁶⁴ What is more, all cults and false religions have anecdotal, experiential claims and evidences of the effectiveness of their belief systems.

In the final analysis, however, there is no infrastructure to such an approach, except that provided by each individual holding to the system.

⁶¹ Pietism is a milder form of mysticism and has itself been used as a source of theology. For example, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher applied pietism (and romanticism) to theology, defining God as that which one takes with absolute dependence and religion as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation to God" (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and James S. Stewart [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928], p. 12, quoted in Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:22).

⁶² In fact, one of such persuasion once quipped to me: The man with the experience is not at the mercy of the man with the doctrine. John MacArthur, in his book *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), gives several examples of this sort of phenomenon, citing, for instance, C. Peter Wagner who said that it was an "unforgettable experience" which helped lead to his involvement with the Third Wave movement (p. 146). In fact, the recent work by Stanley Grenz also gives experience decided precedence over doctrine when defining evangelicalism (*Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, p. 81).

⁶³ *Demons in the World Today* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971), pp. 116–17.

⁶⁴ *Oscult Bondage and Deliverance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), p. 67.

This sort of subjective authority is devoid of objective parameters, inherently unable to permit or levy critique. As such, experiential theology becomes self-destructive because it must be all-inclusive. If everyone's experience becomes authoritative, then none truly is.

History of Doctrine

Still another false source of theology is historical consensus or tradition. This line of thought often appeals to the church fathers (a study known as *patristics*) when establishing doctrine. The Roman Catholic Church exemplifies this practice; however, the practice extends beyond Rome, as is evinced by the number of evangelical theologians who substantiate claims by appealing to large lists of concurring scholars from church history.⁶⁵ Another example is “historic premillennialism” which claims as a main tenet the predominately posttribulational nature of the history of premillennial thought.

Interestingly, this trend is growing in current evangelicalism. Harold O. J. Brown, for instance, in talking about how tradition has been used in the Roman Catholic Church, says the following:

If the church erred by smothering Scripture in tradition, much contemporary scholarship, especially evangelical scholarship, errs by dissecting the Scripture out of the body of believers and the body of belief, by cutting it out of and away from its place in the life—i.e., the tradition—of the company of believers.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ It may be granted, though, that it is generally the case that appeal to this source is normally more pronounced among groups that are creedally and confessionally based.

⁶⁶ “On Method and Means in Theology,” p. 168.

Brown concludes that one's faith must be first biblical but also that it is so only by giving attention to tradition:

One cannot, or can hardly, learn, nourish, or even maintain such a faith without a surrounding and supporting community of belief, and such a community of belief never exists without a community of practice; together these form a living Christian tradition, apart from which and outside of which the individual Christian's life will be impoverished and this theology, if . . . it should be called such, pale and weak.⁶⁷

Packer has similar inclinations. He argues that a theological method must be "Bible-based, Christ-centered, and church-oriented with a sustained life-changing and world-changing interest."⁶⁸ Packer describes his preferred method as "setting up a three-way conversation in which the Christian heritage of understanding, which is called tradition, is given a place alongside the head-scratchings of today, both in the church and outside it, for generating and guiding interpretive reflection on the inspired Scriptures."⁶⁹ Thus, the "church-oriented" aspect of his method is equivalent to "the Christian heritage of understanding . . . [i.e.,] tradition." Grenz likewise makes room for tradition. He advocates three "norms" for theology, the second of which is "the theological heritage of the church."⁷⁰ Geisler as well argues this way, saying that in a proper theological method

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁸ "Is Systematic Theology a Mirage?" p. 23.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁰ *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, p. 93; see also pp. 95ff. His other two "norms" are "the biblical message" and "the thought-forms of the historical-cultural context in which the contemporary people of God seek to speak, live and act" (ibid., p. 93).

“each doctrine [will be] expressed in view of the orthodox teachings of the Church Fathers.”⁷¹ He then concludes rather pointedly:

No one has any right to claim orthodoxy for any teaching that has been condemned by any of the ecumenical creeds, confessions, or councils of the church. Likewise, any teaching not addressed in the ecumenical creeds and councils that is contrary to the universal consent of the Fathers should be considered highly suspect.⁷²

It should be noted here that consulting historical theology to understand how a text or doctrine was handled in the past is an obvious asset—an oft-neglected one, to be sure. However, the danger rests in making the history of doctrine (or some sort of Christian consensus) an inviolable norm in either hermeneutics or, more generally, in theology. Again, Roman Catholicism has done this,⁷³ and evangelical Protestantism comes close when it talks about tradition as a “norm” or a “methodological precondition” for doing theology.

In the end, two dangers are present in this approach. First, there is the danger that making historical theology—tradition—a necessary norm for theology will result in a practical denial of the perspicuity of Scripture. That is to say, Scripture has an inherent clarity, allowing its central message to be self-interpreting. And, second, there is the danger that an undue emphasis on the history of doctrine will undermine

⁷¹ *Systematic Theology*, 1:224.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Ludwig Ott, a Roman Catholic theologian, demonstrates this when he says that “[Roman Catholic] theology . . . accepts, as the sources of its knowledge, Holy Writ and Tradition . . . and also the doctrinal assertions of the Church (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch, ed. James Canon Bastible [St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1954], pp. 2–3). See also “The Relation Between Tradition and Sacred Scripture,” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 31–32, also p. 15, n. 85; and see James G. McCarthy, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Catholic Tradition and the Word of God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 281–309.

individual soul liberty (i.e., the believer's freedom of conscience to come to Scripture *directly* and be taught by the indwelling Spirit) by requiring adherence to extra-biblical sources when formulating theology.

Existentialism

Existentialism is yet another false source for constructing theology. Existentialism is that philosophy which emphasizes human existence.⁷⁴ It focuses on man rather than God and on individual, rather than corporate, identity. Existentialism holds that people are alienated from their true authenticity and thus are in a state of estrangement, despair, and anxiety—*angst*. Salvation for existentialism is found in a passionate commitment to “God” which brings authenticity in defiance of all reason.⁷⁵ Further, in existential theology the source of understanding God (i.e., revelation) is the moment of encounter⁷⁶ between an individual and God, between time and eternity. In this encounter God/eternity brushes man/time tangentially.

This approximates something of a reworked form of Platonic dualism.⁷⁷ And, such a source of theology necessarily ends in extreme pessimism. That is to say, one never truly reaches or knows God.

⁷⁴ Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), s.v. “Existentialism,” p. 44.

⁷⁵ And, as a point of historical importance, existentialism influenced American theology primarily through the neo-orthodoxy of men such as Reinhold Niebuhr. This was a movement which posited, as Reymond explains, that “revelation is always a non-verbal *direct theophany* outside of ordinary history, and religious truth is always personal or existential truth—the effect of an existential crisis encounter between God and the individual human existent” (Robert L. Reymond, *Preach the Word* [Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988], p. 4).

⁷⁶ Karl Barth developed this idea of “encounter” and integrated it philosophically into his idea of “revelation.”

⁷⁷ The dualistic underpinnings of such thinking owe chiefly to Plato but also to Immanuel Kant. The latter's dualism can be described thusly: (1) The *noumenal* realm, which describes the world as it really is “out there” apart from human experience, is without discernible attributes and cannot be truly known. It is the realm of faith or practical reason. This realm is similar to Plato's realm of the “forms,” i.e., the ideal, spiritual, eternal, and perfect. (2) The *phenomenal* realm, which describes the appearance of things (i.e., what the mind processes via its innate structural categories), is the apparitional realm where the autonomous mind reigns supreme. This is the realm of pure reason.

Such dualism in any form—Platonic, Kantian, or otherwise—puts an impassable wall between the individual and God with the net result that doing systematic theology becomes an impossible endeavor. Inevitably existentialism also fosters skepticism regarding God's very existence. If God cannot be truly known since revelation cannot occur in (i.e., penetrate) time, then nothing is lost theologically if God ceases to exist.⁷⁸

Comparative Religion

Finally, some theologians are currently looking in the direction of other non-Christian religions because it is assumed, as Langdon Gilkey explains, that “there is ‘truth’ to be found in [these] other traditions” and, further, that “the traditions of other religions can be a creative and authentic resource for Christian theology.”⁷⁹ Some even claim that this “truth” can comprise salvific information.⁸⁰

Among other problems, the chief liability of this approach is its lack of objective authority. The individual theologian creates his own criteria for what he does and does not cull from these other religions.

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that the 1960s American “Death-of-God” atheism of Thomas J. Altizer, Harvey Cox, Paul Van Buren and Gabriel Vahanian actually arose out of the milieu of existentialist neo-orthodoxy. It is said that Paul Tillich was allegedly deeply hurt when he found out that some of his former students became “Christian atheists.” However, such was an inevitable result of his existential theology. The “god” existential philosophy postulates to explain the moral is impersonal, without attributes, and ultimately, unable to be truly known. In the end, existentialism’s god-postulate is little better than the atheist’s no-god.

⁷⁹ *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 61–63, quoted in Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ “God calls on all persons to seek him, whether they seek him from within religion or outside it. There is enough truth in most religions for people to take hold of and put their trust in God’s mercy” (Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], p. 111).

THE LIMITATIONS OF THEOLOGY

While it is possible to do theology from the biblical corpus alone and with the aim of correlating the material therein, there are a few inherent limitations still present.⁸¹

The Finiteness of Human Understanding

Man is a finite creature. This means, among other things, that his mind partakes of limitations. On the contrary, God is infinite (i.e., without limitations except those which are self-imposed). This means that in the area of human understanding, God is incomprehensible; He cannot be *fully* known by finite minds. Scripture bears out this idea. For instance, Job's counselor Zophar asks: "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). And, the Apostle Paul, echoing this passage, says similarly: "Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Obviously, this situation imposes a serious limitation for systematic theology. However this by no means precludes a true knowledge of God or His work. It simply means that every systematic theology will be noticeably colored with human finiteness, exemplified at least by the fact that each system will inevitably be built upon misinterpreted or faultily understood texts.

⁸¹ Most of these are taken from Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 262-66. Cf. also Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 34-37.

The Mediatorial Nature of the Bible

Not only is the human mind finite and therefore limited, so too is human language. In principle Jesus affirms as much when He tells the disciples: “I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Still, human language is obviously a suitable, if still limited, medium for the infinite God to communicate to man. Language, after all, was God-given as part of the image of God in man and was given for this purpose. Yet, while suitable, man and his language are still finite, and this debilitation makes an adequate theological construction a difficult undertaking.

The Problem of Spiritual Discernment

A problem related to finiteness is that of spiritual discernment. While at times misunderstanding texts is indeed the unintentional result of such finiteness, at others it is simply willful, as in the case of the individuals Peter describes as being “untaught” in 2 Peter 3:16. On this point, Strong helpfully observes that “since holy affection is a condition of religious knowledge, all moral imperfection in the individual Christian and in the church serves as a hindrance to the working out of a complete theology.”⁸² This moral imperfection which leads to incomplete perception may either be caused by unbelief or spiritual immaturity. In the former case, one is *unable* to accept the things of God (1 Cor 2:14) and is blinded from seeing the truth (2 Cor 4:4). Paul likens such imperception to having a veil placed over one’s heart (2 Cor 3:14)—a situation needing divine intervention to correct (2 Cor 4:6). In contrast, in the latter case, spiritual

⁸² *Systematic Theology*, p. 36.

immaturity *binds* perception, necessitating a review of the elementary matters of the faith (Heb 5:11–14).

The Silence of the Written Revelation

A final limit owes to the selectivity of the Bible. That is, the Bible simply does not tell man everything there is to know about God. In fact, the Bible does not tell man everything his finite mind *could* know or *would like to* know about God. Rather, God in His infinite wisdom revealed and recorded in the Bible what it pleased Him to preserve and what He intended to be used as source material for theology.

God indicates such when He tells Israel, for instance, that the secret things belong to Him and the revealed things to them (Deut 29:29). This is illustrated also when John says that Jesus did more than what is contained in his record (John 20:30; 21:25). These secret and unrevealed things make a comprehensive systematic theology impossible. However, as John further says, what is included is sufficient for the gospel's purpose and is, by implication, also sufficient for the systematician's purpose (John 20:31; cf. also 2 Pet 1:3).

THE QUALITIES OF A THEOLOGIAN

Finally, having established and clarified the aim, source, and possibility of doing theology, there are still a few things necessary for the systematician wishing to do his task correctly.

A Disciplined Mind

First, the theologian need not be a genius, but he must bring to the study the following personal qualities: (1) He must have a love of learning and an insatiable thirst for the doctrines of Scripture;⁸³ (2) he must be able to organize the material he studies and correlate it with what he already knows;⁸⁴ and (3) he must be disciplined to go no further than what is written and be content simply to think God's thoughts after Him. This final quality requires not only mental discipline but intellectual humility as well.

A Knowledge of the Original Languages of the Bible

Second, the theologian must be proficient in the biblical languages, including an attendant proficiency in exegetical methods. Exegesis is, after all, foundational to systematic theology, and the original biblical languages are foundational to correct exegesis. John Murray, whose work masterfully combines skill in both, says the following:

The main source of revelation is the Bible. Hence exposition of the Scripture is basic to systematic theology. Its task is not simply the exposition of particular passages. That is the task of exegesis. Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this

⁸³ This is especially important because, as Murray well-notes, "systematic theology is never a finished science nor is its task ever completed" ("Systematic Theology," p. 6).

⁸⁴ Reymond, in listing what he calls the "intellectual demands" in carrying out the Great Commission similarly includes the ability for "the correlation of the data of revelation," something he calls the "didactic or catechetical demand" ("The Justification of Theology," p. 5).

teaching under the appropriate topics. . . . It is apparent how dependent [systematic theology] is upon the science of exegesis. It cannot coordinate and relate the teaching of particular passages without knowing what the teaching is. So exegesis is basic to its objective.⁸⁵

In sum, systematic theology builds its structure with the material that correct exegesis provides, and this structure then aids in later exegesis and vice-versa.

A Holy Affection Toward God

Third, the theologian must have a holy affection toward God. David captures this in Psalm 25:14: "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant." "Secret" translates

⁸⁵ "Systematic Theology," p. 17. There is an intertwining relationship between exegesis and theology that is difficult to explain. Exegetical studies form the foundation, framework, and content of theology. But, there is also an "analogy of faith" which is simply the corpus of established doctrines that cannot be contradicted or overturned by an isolated passage or a peculiar interpretation. As Moisés Silva notes, theological commitments inevitably affect exegesis:

It is not feasible to separate biblical interpretation from theology. . . . Many scholars doubt, or even deny, that it is really possible to use the Bible for the purposes of developing a systematic theology. In their view, the various biblical authors had different, indeed incompatible theologies, so that the attempt to treat them as a unity can result only in distorting the text ("The Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics," in Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 259).

He further notes,

The old advice that biblical students should try as much as possible to approach a text without a prior idea as to what it means (and that therefore commentaries should be read after, not before, the exegesis) does have the advantage of encouraging independent thinking; besides, it reminds us that our primary aim is indeed to discover the historical meaning and that we are always in danger of imposing our meaning on the text. Nevertheless, the advice is fundamentally flawed because it is untrue to the very process of learning. I would suggest, rather, that a student who comes to a biblical passage with, say, a dispensationalist background, should attempt to make sense of the text assuming that dispensationalism is correct. I would go so far as to say that, upon encountering a detail that does not seem to fit the dispensationalist scheme, the student should try and "make it fit." The purpose is not to mishandle the text but to become self-conscious about what we all do anyway. The result should be increased sensitivity to those features of the text that disturb our interpretive framework and thus a greater readiness to modify that framework (pp. 263–64. See also Silva's "Systematic Theology and the Apostle to the Gentiles," *TJ* 15 [1994]: 3–26, especially pp. 22, 26).

sodh, a word immediately describing intimacy and confidentiality;⁸⁶ in fact, the NIV puts it this way: “The Lord *confides* in those who fear him.” This word is found in contexts more explicitly describing revelation, such as Jeremiah 23:18, 22 and especially Amos 3:7. Therefore, David seems to be asserting here that fearing the Lord is (or holy affections are) directly related to an increased ability for understanding God’s revealed truth.⁸⁷

Further, Paul suggests in Romans 12:2 that in order to know and approve the will of God, the believer must both yield himself sacrificially to God and avoid conformity to this present godless order (“world”: *aion*). As Murray notes, the will of God here is the “will of commandment,” essentially the will of God “as it pertains to our responsible activity in progressive sanctification.”⁸⁸ That said, sanctification obviously requires that Scripture be properly applied and obeyed (which activities themselves require correct understanding and correlation). Therefore, Paul implies here that a yielded life—a holy affection for God—is a requisite for understanding God’s written will and, thus, for doing theology.

Conversely, without this holy love for God and His word, Scripture hides its significance and systematic theology is, consequently, impossible. Strong helpfully concludes, “Only the renewed heart can properly feel its need of divine revelation, or understand that revelation when given.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cf. Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in vol. 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), p. 231; Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 1:345.

⁸⁷ Cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), p. 225. In fact, the “fear of the Lord” is essentially one’s living and saving faith.

⁸⁸ *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:115.

⁸⁹ *Systematic Theology*, p. 40. Grudem likewise talks about the requisite of holy affection, putting it in terms of prayer, humility, rejoicing, and praise (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 32–35). James Petigru Boyce further fills out this idea of holy affection, listing six traits which comprise the spirit with which one should study theology:

(1) “With reverence for truth, and especially for the truth taught in the Word of God”; (2) “with earnest prayer for divine help”; (3) “with careful searching of heart against prejudice”; (4) “with timidity, as to the reception and propagation of new doctrine”; (5) “but with a spirit willing and anxious to examine, and to accept whatever we may

Divine Enlightenment

Finally, the theologian must have divine illumination. He needs this not only to mitigate his inherent depravity but also to enable him to appreciate and correlate the significance of the text throughout his life. Here it is also important to note that this ministry of the Spirit is bound up with various ordinary means, summarily the diligent study mentioned above. This is to say that the Spirit's illumination works *organically* through the interpreter's mind as the interpreter actively engages in the learning process.⁹⁰

be convinced is true"; and (6) "with teachable humility, which, knowing that God has not taught us in his Word all the truth that exists, not even all the truth on many a single point, accepts with implicit faith all that he has taught, and awaits his own time for that more full revelation which shall remove all our present perplexities" (*Abstract of Systematic Theology* [Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887], pp. 6-7).

It should be noted that because of the infinity and ultimate incomprehensibility of God and, therefore, His revelation of Himself in Scripture, believers will always have theological "perplexities." That is, there are some aspects of theology that are only *infinitely* correlated and understood. God alone comprehends such truth.

⁹⁰ This is not to remove the Spirit's activity altogether; rather, it is to argue that illumination is less direct than is often thought. Chafer argues for a different perspective, suggesting the Spirit's work is actually a more direct work:

While . . . the Bible is couched in the simplest of terms, its message, in many particulars, transcends the range of human understanding; but provision is made whereby these human limitations may be overcome. The Spirit of God is given to every saved person as an indwelling Paraclete, thus providing a limitless resource both for understanding and teachableness (*Systematic Theology*, 1:9).

On the surface this seems to negate the Spirit's use of means in illumination, but the general thought is well taken.

Part 2



THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

Chapter 2

THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION: SIX STAGES IN THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

There are six essential stages in God's revelation of Himself to man in Scripture. They are as follows:¹

1. **Preparation:** The *Vehicle* of Revelation
2. **Revelation:** The *Content* of Revelation
3. **Inspiration:** The *Record* of Revelation
4. **Preservation:** The *Security* of Revelation
5. **Illumination:** The *Certainty* and *Significance* of Revelation
6. **Interpretation:** The *Meaning* of Revelation

Preparation

The Bible was not mechanically given. Instead, God prepared the writers with their various dispositions, training and experiences long before any writing took place. God testifies to this when He says to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). The parallel verbs "formed," "consecrated" and

¹ These stages, with the exception of illumination, were outlined by my theology teacher, Alva J. McClain, "The Doctrine of Scripture" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

“appointed” each suggest that God had indeed prepared Jeremiah for his prophetic task well before he was even born. Paul speaks nearly identically in Galatians when he says, “But . . . God . . . had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace” (1:15).

Other examples of such providence abound. For instance, Moses was specially trained (Exod 2:1–10), enabling him to give and record Israel’s Law. David was a shepherd, a providential asset for conveying the pastoral imagery of Psalm 23. Amos was specially prepared—rustic and rough-hewn—so that he could convey the particularly robust message God had for him, while Isaiah was specially fitted to deliver his more refined work. None of these would have been suited to deliver the other’s message, but all were specially prepared for the specific task God had designed for them.

B. B. Warfield gives this point classic expression, saying that God’s preparation was

physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives and, indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them.²

He then further expands this thought, saying,

As the light that passes through the colored glass of a cathedral window, we are told, is light from heaven, but is stained by the tints of the glass through which it passes; so

² *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), p. 155.

any word of God which is passed through the mind and soul of a man must come out discolored by the personality through which it is given, and just to that degree ceases to be the pure word of God. *But what if this personality has itself been formed by God into precisely the personality it is, for the express purpose of communicating to the word given through it just the coloring which it gives it* [emphasis added]? What if the colors of the stained-glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely the tone and quality it receives from them? What if the word of God that comes to His people is framed by God into the word of God it is, precisely by means of the qualities of the men formed by Him for the purpose through which it is given?³

Revelation

Bernard Ramm says that “in the broadest sense revelation is the sum total of the ways in which God makes himself known.”⁴ However, to put it slightly differently, revelation is also the communication of previously unknown facts and ideas about God and His purposes. That is to say, to be known, God must reveal Himself. He is unable to be discovered from below; revelation is always from the top down.⁵ Here, too, it may

³ Ibid., pp. 155–56.

⁴ *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 17. W. T. Conner puts it this way: “By revelation of himself, we mean that somehow God has put himself within the range of man’s knowing powers” (*Revelation and God* [Nashville: Broadman, 1936], p. 45, quoted in James L. Garrett, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], p. 44).

⁵ Greg Bahnsen puts it well when he says, “We affirm that God alone has the competence and authority to define His own character, work, and will, so that man’s knowledge of the same depends upon divine revelation [emphasis added]” (“A Reformed Confession Regarding

be added that this revelation is categorized into two groups: general and special or universal and particular.⁶

While special revelation came in “many ways” (Heb 1:1), each dispensing was always mediated through or by secondary means (words, Exod 33:11; written text, Exod 31:18; dreams, Dan 7:1; visions, Ezek 1:1, et al.).⁷ Scripture is a subset of special revelation, comprising the preserved record of mediated revelation. Here, before moving to further discuss Scriptural revelation, its counterpart, general revelation, will be briefly explored to help contrast its domain with the domain of special revelation.

General Revelation

General revelation is God’s witness of Himself to all men, mediated through the created order. In one sense, everything that is not God reveals information about Him; God’s stamp is on everything that He has planned, created, presently sustains and controls. In short, every aspect of the universe bears testimony or witness concerning God. While this revelation is restrictive in content, it is nevertheless absolutely clear and divinely authoritative.

General revelation is, then, *general* in two senses: (1) It is given to mankind in general, not to a restricted group; and (2) it gives a general

Hermeneutics,” n.p. [cited 10 September 2007]. Online: <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt173.htm>). Herman Bavinck helpfully adds that even the idea of revelation itself is predicated on and can be learned from Scripture alone. He explains,

The very possibility of revelation as a communication from a personal God requires a theistic, supernaturalistic worldview. A materialistic worldview is diametrically opposed to all ideas of such revelation. The chief error here is a commitment to a religiously neutral scientific method, a goal that is impossible. On the other hand, a scientific investigation rooted in Christian faith yields results that are compatible with Scripture and science. *Thus, a true concept of revelation can only be derived from revelation itself* [emphasis added] (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–], 1:293–94).

⁶ Robert D. Culver prefers using “natural light” or “the light of reason” instead of general revelation. He does so because “natural light” was at one time the common term for this revelation and “the light of reason” “since our rational powers, reflecting upon experiential information, are a way of gaining this knowledge of God” (*Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* [Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005], p. 24).

⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:301.

knowledge of God.⁸ This general knowledge includes, at the least, God's existence and something of His character (Rom 1:20, "eternal power and divine nature"). But it does not include the love of God, the character of sin, the need for faith and repentance, the person and work of Jesus Christ, or the promise of forgiveness.

It is difficult to say what exactly general revelation conveys. Bruce Demarest, for instance, lists no fewer than sixteen propositions:

1. **God is** (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19).
2. **God is Creator** (Acts 14:15).
3. **God is uncreated** (Acts 17:24).
4. **God is sustainer** (Acts 17:25).
5. **God is sovereign** (Acts 17:24, 26).
6. **God is self-sufficient** (Acts 17:25).
7. **God is transcendent** (Acts 17:24).
8. **God is immanent** (Acts 17:26–27).
9. **God is eternal** (Rom 1:20).
10. **God is great** (Ps 8:3–4).
11. **God is powerful** (Rom 1:20).
12. **God is good** (Acts 14:17).
13. **God is wise** (Ps 104:24).
14. **God is righteous** (Rom 1:32; 2:11).
15. **God should be worshiped** (Acts 14:15; 17:24).
16. **God will judge evil** (Rom 2:15–16).⁹

⁸ Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 17.

⁹ *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 243.

This listing appears too broad, since some of the proof texts above, especially from Acts 14 and 17, refer not to generally revealed information but to propositions revealed in Scripture, namely the Old Testament. A more preferable list is given by Paul Enns. He delineates eight items under three broad headings:

Nature

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Psalm 19:1–6 | Reveals that God exists and is glorious. |
| Romans 1:18–21 | Reveals that God is omnipotent and is Judge. |

Providence

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| Matthew 5:45 | Reveals that God is benevolent to all people. |
| Daniel 2:21 | Reveals that God both raises and removes rulers. |

Conscience

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Romans 2:14–15 | Reveals that God has placed His law in human hearts. ¹⁰ |
|----------------|--|

The two principal channels of general revelation are the creation (Rom 1:19–20; Acts 14:17; Ps 19:1–4) and the human personality (Gen 1:26–27 [the image of God] and Rom 2:15 [conscience]), although some do add providence (calling it at times the divine control of history).¹¹ And, this revelation seems to have a two-fold purpose. (1) It forms a background and prerequisite for special revelation. The God of the Bible and of special revelation is the same God everyone already knows from general

¹⁰ *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), p. 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also Demarest, *General Revelation*, p. 14, who calls it “the providential ordering of history.”

revelation. In this respect, general and special revelation are correlative; they are mutually dependent and, when understood correctly, are mutually fruitful. (2) It increases human condemnation because men knowingly, and therefore inexcusably, reject the God revealed (Rom 1:20).¹²

Finally, as noted, general revelation unmistakably reveals propositions about God; however, it does so in non-verbal form (Ps 19:3, “There is no speech, nor are there words”). And, since it is not in propositional form, general revelation is not a source for the doctrine of Scripture.

Special Revelation

Special revelation is the knowledge of God in concrete form given to a specific person or a particular community.¹³ It is a special message to a special people. Millard Erickson calls it “God’s manifestation of himself at particular times and places through particular events.”¹⁴ The principal channels are direct revelation (e.g., “God said” in Gen 1:28; 3:13, 14; 6:13; et al.); mighty acts (and their interpretations), both miracles (Exod 5:1–2;

¹² Bahnsen’s confession well-summarizes this point:

We affirm that God continually reveals Himself as Creator, Sustainer, Governor and Judge to all mankind through the external world’s order and splendor, as well as through man’s internal consciousness as a rational and moral being. We affirm that this general revelation so clearly, effectively, and inescapably displays the deity, personal attributes, glory, and moral will of God that all men are left without excuse for sin and unbelief, standing under His wrath and condemnation. We affirm that, apart from God’s saving grace, fallen men naturally respond to God’s general revelation by seeking a variety of unrighteous ways (ranging from open repudiation to false religiosity) to suppress and distort the truth about God, resulting in vain reasoning and darkened understanding. We deny that God’s general revelation communicates His saving grace or plan, and that it can relieve man’s spiritual, intellectual or moral plight (Greg Bahnsen, “A Reformed Confession Regarding Hermeneutics,” n.p. [cited 10 September 2007]. Online: <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt173.htm>).

¹³ Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), p. 171.

6:1) and providence (Ezek 11:9–10); the lives of believers (Matt 5:13–16; 2 Cor 3:2–3); the Bible (Heb 1:1b); and Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2).¹⁵

The doctrine of Scripture (Bibliology) deals with the special revelation of God in the Bible and is the form of God's self-disclosure that partakes of inspiration. Not every datum or bit of information found in the Bible is technically special revelation, in the sense of a direct self-disclosure of God. As will be noted, the biblical writers at times draw their material from non-revelatory and non-inspired sources such as public records, genealogies, collections of ballads, diaries of certain individuals and oral accounts. Still, in the broader sense, the Bible is special revelation, as opposed to or in distinction from general revelation. That is to say, in its *entirety* it constitutes the Word of God in concrete form to a specific people.

Here it will be helpful to delineate a few descriptive features of this form of special revelation.

A Genuine Cognition of God

First, the Bible brings one into an actual knowledge and awareness of the true God. This is an intellectual apprehension involving man's rational powers. In short, God has revealed something about Himself that the human mind can assimilate.

This idea, however, has met with objections, not least from those theologians imbibing existentialism and other post-Enlightenment thought. These theologians worship the Unknown (and Unknowable) God. In their view, God is apprehended only in a mystical or other-worldly

¹⁵ Some have restricted special revelation to redemptive information, but there was special revelation to Adam and Eve prior to their fall into sin—a pre-redemptive special revelation.

sense, in some sort of personal encounter, which normally approximates blind trust. This thinking is rooted, for some, in the assertion that all knowledge begins with sense experience. Therefore, since God, they claim, is not in the realm of sense experience, He cannot be known. Immanuel Kant and David Hume exemplified such thought. Friedrich Schleiermacher, an early proponent of religious liberalism, likewise held that religion (faith) was found in feeling, *not* knowing.

Others object based not on the nature of human knowledge but rather on the basis of God's nature. For instance, Karl Barth said that God is too great for man to know. He held that God is absolutely transcendent and, as such, that He is totally incomprehensible. And, similar to Kant, Barth argued that when revelation takes place it takes place when man encounters God in a supra-historical realm.

By way of reply, two things should be said. First, the Bible indicates that revelation can be known and, in fact, has been known by unnumbered multitudes of individuals. And, second, the objections above, particularly those rooted in Kantian empiricism, appear to preclude a genuine knowledge of *anything*. Such skepticism is therefore self-destructive.

A Formulation in Propositions

Second, propositional revelation means that God's self-disclosure in Scripture is in rational truth statements—that is, subject-predicate constructions. This correlates with the previous point. If the knowledge the Bible conveys is cognitive, it must be given in a manner the human mind can process.¹⁶ The human mind cannot process non-propositional material. To argue otherwise, one must use propositions, demonstrating

¹⁶ See Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 35–54.

the axiomatic nature of such communication. And, in arguing otherwise one must argue against the clear indication of Scripture, which employs propositions (and assumes an understanding of them) from the beginning: "In the beginning *God created*."

One current objection is that God's revelation occurs solely in *events*, similar to the existentialist's encounter. Here, then, some speak of the "Christ-event," rather than of Jesus of Nazareth, God's self-revelation in human form. The nub of this objection is that the Bible is merely a witness or a pointer to these events, not an actual revelation itself since God does not communicate in such explicit propositions.

In reply, it should be said that there is no valid *event* revelation without *propositional* revelation. Event revelation (such as a mighty act of God) is valid only if an infallible interpreter is present to explain its significance, which explanation itself plainly necessitates propositions. An interesting example of this is found in John 12:28–29, a text describing God's speaking from heaven. Some, John tells us, entirely misunderstood God's speech, thinking instead that it had simply thundered or that an angel had spoken. These misunderstood, in one sense, because they did not have divine, propositional interpretation to make the revelatory event intelligible.

Still another objection is the idea that revelation is personal (in contrast to propositional) and that revelation never occurs—the Bible does not *become* the Word of God—unless there is a personal response. In essence, what God reveals to people is *Himself*, not concepts about Himself. This type of personal revelation, the objection claims, precludes its being objectified in a book; it can only be known as revelation and can only become such when it elicits a personal response.

In reply to this, it can be said that God does reveal Himself personally, though this revelation is nevertheless conceptual in nature.

That is, there are not two different kinds of revelation or truth, one personal and the other propositional. No revelation of God bypasses the intellect; therefore, due to the nature of the human mind, there is no personal revelation which is not propositional.¹⁷ Further, revelation is still revelation regardless of any human response. Bavinck is helpful here, saying, "The Word of God has an objective content that was established before, and persists apart from, our faith, just as much as the world of colors and sounds exists independently of the blind and the deaf."¹⁸

The Utilization of Human Language

Third, human language was divinely given and is adequate for reception of revelation and is bound up with man's being in the image of God. On this latter point, it may further be said that it is the image of God which epistemologically validates language as a vehicle for communication. To deny such, one would have to either deny that God is personal (since man is personal and persons communicate via language) or deny that man is personal (and thus not in God's image).¹⁹

Various objections enter in here as well. Two will be considered. First, it has been objected that human language is inadequate to reveal God because human language is inherently symbolic and, thus, cannot convey literal, absolute truth on any subject. And, second, it has been objected that human language, being finite, cannot convey the infinite concepts revelation from God would convey.

¹⁷ R. Laird Harris, "The Problem of Communication," in *The Bible: The Living Word of God*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), pp. 83–100.

¹⁸ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:53.

¹⁹ Cf. Harris, "The Problem of Communication," pp. 87–88.

In response to both of these, it may be said, initially, that human language does indeed have limitations since it is finite. This was stated already above. However, this does not preclude it from conveying absolute truth about an infinite person, namely God. Surely, such statements are difficult to make and, in the end, incomplete, due to the fact that there are things which human language simply cannot reveal, not having the infinite categories to express them. Nevertheless, to categorically deny language the ability to convey absolutes both assumes what is denied and, more fundamentally, runs contrary to Jesus' own practice. After all, Jesus Himself used human language to convey absolute truth on many subjects (e.g., John 14:6). In short, the above objection leads ultimately to skepticism about all communication, and it leads to a denial of the person and work of Jesus Christ.²⁰

Inspiration

Fourth, not only must special revelation be given (since general revelation is inadequate) and propositionally-interpreted (since it is liable to be misunderstood), but this interpreted revelation must also be infallibly preserved, that is, recorded.²¹ This then introduces the necessary work of *inspiration*.

Here a few points are helpful in rounding out this idea of inspiration. First, it should be remembered that not all special revelation enjoys the

²⁰ For further thought on this subject, see J. I. Packer, "The Adequacy of Human Language," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 197–226; Jack Barentsen, "The Validity of Human Language: A Vehicle for Divine Truth," *GTJ* 9 (1988): 21–44; Vern S. Poythress, "Adequacy of Language and Accommodation," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 351–76; and Raymond, *Preach the Word*, pp. 9–15.

²¹ This is especially true today, since special revelation has ceased. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Giger, ed. James Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (reprint ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 1:58

quality of inspiration. The non-literary Old Testament prophets are clear examples (cf. also Rev 10:3–4). Second, in Scripture one can have an infallibly preserved record (inspiration) of non-revelatory material. As noted above, some biblical authors use public documents, histories, collections of ballads, and other non-specially revealed source material (cf. Josh 10:12, 13; 1 Chron 29:29; 2 Chron 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 26:22; 32:32; Luke 1:1–4; et al.). Finally, as will be developed, inspiration has to do simply with the *record*, not the person (2 Tim 3:16).²²

Preservation

Fifth, theoretically, Scripture could be corrupted, lost or destroyed. Therefore, God also preserves Scripture so that His people might, in each generation, possess the very Word of God.

The work of preserving Scripture has been and basically is a *providential*, as opposed to a *miraculous*, work.²³ That is, while miraculous preservation would involve the (continual) *direct* application of God's power, providential preservation employs secondary causation. God never promised the former and, as such, no text of Scripture implies it. Because of this, God does not miraculously prevent mistranslations or errant transmissions.²⁴

²² See J. I. Packer, "Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority," *Churchman* 81 (1967): 7–21; see also his "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Gechan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), pp. 141–53.

²³ There are, however, two exceptions to this, and they both occurred during exceptional circumstances, namely God's giving of the tables of the Law (Exod 32, 35; Deut 10) and the scroll of Jeremiah (Jer 36).

²⁴ Copies and reproductions were not (nor are) made by the carrying along of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), as the autographs were. Young similarly notes that "only . . . what [the 'holy men of God'] spoke under the Spirit's bearing is inspired. [Therefore,] it would certainly be unwarrantable to maintain that copies of what they spoke were also inspired, since those copies were not made as men were borne of the Spirit" (Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 55).

Some have argued that Scripture does indeed promise something more than providential preservation. One often used text in such an appeal is Psalm 12:6–7. It says, “The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace of the earth, refined seven times. You, O Lord, will keep them; You will preserve him from this generation.” This text, however, says nothing about textual preservation at all. Rather, the “them” who are kept refers more naturally to the afflicted and needy of v. 5, as does the “him” who is preserved “from this generation forever,” than to “the words of the Lord.” In fact the NIV reads this way: “O Lord, you will keep *us* safe and protect *us* from such people forever.” The reference then to “the words of the Lord” in v. 6 is simply a promise meant to reassure God’s people that the godly will be protected from liars (v. 2), flatterers (v. 3), and those that malign at will (v. 4). In other words, God’s revelatory prophetic words stand in sharpest contrast to the false and perverse words of the enemy.

Preservation Taught Directly

Because many of the common proof-texts for preservation have been found wanting, some have alternatively argued that preservation is not an explicit doctrine but rather is derived from empirical observation²⁵ or by implication from the doctrine of inspiration. However, preservation seems to be more explicit than these suggest. For instance, Psalm 119:152 can be legitimately interpreted to explicitly teach preservation. It says, “Of old I have known Your testimonies that You have founded them forever.” That the psalmist is here referring to written revelation is evident

²⁵ See, e.g., W. Edward Glenny, “The Preservation of Scripture,” in *One Bible Only? Examining Exclusive Claims for the King James Bible*, ed. Roy E. Beacham and Kevin Bauder (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), pp. 102–133; also Daniel Wallace, “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism,” *GTJ* 12 (1991): 17–50.

from the context (vv. 145–52), in which he refers variously to God’s “statutes,” “testimonies,” “words,” “ordinances,” and “law.” In short, the “testimonies” (v. 152) refer to the written revelation of God, and these He has “founded . . . forever” (NIV: “established them to last forever”).²⁶

Coupled with Psalm 119:152, there are several other texts that strongly imply the doctrine of preservation. One example is Psalm 119:160, which says, “The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.” The verse’s context, again, points up that written revelation is in view (cf. vv. 153–59). It is the Torah (i.e., the “righteous ordinances”) that is simultaneously “truth” and “everlasting.”²⁷

Preservation Taught Indirectly

Aside from proof from specific texts, preservation is also taught by inference from other doctrines.²⁸ For instance, the continuing authority of the Word of God strongly implies its necessary preservation. Matthew 5:17–18 demonstrates this. Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” Here the references to the “smallest letter” (KJV: “jot”) and “stroke” (KJV: “tittle”) are hyperbolic, indicating the inalterability and thus the continuing authority of God’s entire written revelation. And, if this revelation has continuing authority, the implication is that the text will be sufficiently

²⁶ For a good discussion of this text and topic, see William W. Combs, “The Preservation of Scripture,” *DBSJ* 5 (2000): 17–18.

²⁷ Another example is Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (cf. 1 Pet 1:24–25).

²⁸ Cf. Combs, “The Preservation of Scripture,” who demonstrates the necessary relationship between Scripture’s preservation and its inspiration, infallibility, trustworthiness and authority (pp. 18–30).

preserved so that it may continue to *govern* each generation of believers. John 10:35 points in a similar direction. There Jesus says, "Scripture cannot be broken." "Broken" (*luo*) denotes annulling, repealing or invalidating its authority.²⁹ In other words, Scripture's *authority* cannot be annulled, which again suggests the necessity for sufficient preservation.

This point is also established by the frequent commands to know and obey Scripture. For instance, God says in Deuteronomy 6:6-9: "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. . . . You shall teach them. . . . Talk of them. . . . Bind them as a sign on your hand. . . . [And,] write them on the doorposts of your house and your gates." This command implies, at the least, that "these words" of God would be sufficiently preserved, ostensibly in written form, so that each successive generation could equally obey these injunctions. This seems to be the case, as well, in places like Psalm 1:2 where David talks about the blessed man who "meditates" on the law "day and night," a practice necessitating some form of preservation. Conversely, this is seen in texts such as Matthew 22:29 where people are rebuked for not knowing Scripture. There Jesus chides the Sadducees for "not understanding the Scriptures." Nicodemus received a similar response (John 3:10). Such a response from Jesus assumes the responsibility to know (and understand) Scripture, which, in turn, assumes its preservation.

Further, preservation is also implied in the warnings against corrupting the *text* of Scripture by either adding to or removing its words (cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:5-6; Dan 12:4 and Rev 22:18-19). Each warning assumes an extant copy, capable of being altered. In the same vein, warnings are given against corrupting the *message* of Scripture

²⁹ Cf. EDNT, s.v. "*luo*," by Karl Kertelge, 2:368.

by faulty hermeneutics, sterile tradition, and hypocritical application (cf. Mark 7:9, 13; 2 Thess 2:2). In each warning, there is an assumption of a preserved message, which itself requires some sort of vehicle for preservation, namely a text.

It is also interesting to note that Scripture contains references to copies of written revelation, thus preservation in action. In Deuteronomy 17:18–19, the (future) king in Israel is commanded to “write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll.” Presumably, the reading of the Law at the dedication of the wall in Nehemiah 8:8 was from extant copies. Further, the “parchments,” which Paul asked Timothy to bring to him, were copies of the Scriptures (2 Tim 4:13; cf. also Luke 4:16–21 and Acts 17:2, 11).

Preservation: Further Issues

Here it must be asserted that preservation does not necessarily mean *availability* in written form. After all, the Scriptures had been hidden and unavailable in written form before being found by Josiah during the temple’s renovation (7th century B.C.; 2 Kgs 22:8).³⁰ They had indeed been preserved, if still unavailable. So, while Scripture does promise its own preservation, it does not state how or even where this will be done.

This situation has led, in part, to the rise of the discipline of textual criticism (also called *lower criticism*). In this discipline scholars endeavor to access the original words of Scripture by diligently sifting through extant manuscripts, noting, among other things, relationships and variants among these texts.

³⁰ Apparently Manasseh and his son Amon had destroyed all the personal copies of the Law.

In fact, this situation raises two related questions. First, “Is *every* word of the original documents preserved?” and, second, if so, “How?” Conservative theologians have generally answered these in one of three ways: (1) Every word has been miraculously preserved in (only) one text-type, text or version; (2) every word has been providentially preserved in the totality of existing, though not necessarily extant (i.e., available), manuscripts; and (3) the essential message has been providentially preserved in the totality of extant manuscripts.

The first option is ruled out because it is based on proof-texts allegedly teaching miraculous preservation and, also, because there is no empirical evidence of such preservation in the totality of extant manuscripts. That is to say, no two manuscripts, out of the thousands which are extant, perfectly agree. Further, to claim one manuscript certainly contains the original over another would necessitate employing infallible criteria for such selection, criteria which simply do not exist.

As for the second option, it too is doubtful. It is so because most scholars recognize that not *every* word of the original has been preserved. 1 Samuel 13:1 is a classic example. Still, this option is difficult to completely rule out since it may be claimed that the entire text of 1 Samuel 13:1 is preserved somewhere in the corpus of existing, though (perhaps) not yet extant, manuscripts.³¹

³¹ In light of this, the question is frequently asked: “Could the church have lost inspired documents?” It appears to some scholars, for example, that 1 Corinthians 5:9 and Colossians 4:16 imply that some inspired documents have not been preserved. It is explained by these that it is theoretically possible for an inspired book to not be included in the canon, because the Holy Spirit arranges it thusly. And that the loss of such a document is no greater than the loss of the infallible, inerrant and authoritative *spoken* words of the non-canonical or non-literary prophets (e.g., Elijah or Elisha).

Here a simple theological syllogism is helpful in response: (1) Premise—inspiration and canonicity are theologically correlative (i.e., each necessarily demands the other); (2) Premise—canonicity and preservation are theologically correlative; (3) Conclusion—inspiration, canonicity and preservation are theologically correlative. In short, if preservation is a correlate of inspiration, then there are no lost, inspired writings. This means that the above problem texts on preservation

Finally, because of the liabilities of the other two options, the third option seems best. The essential message from God in the original manuscripts is what has been (and is) preserved providentially in *all* of the extant manuscripts, versions, patristic quotations, et al.³² B. B. Warfield sums up this point well, saying orthodoxy asserts “the adequate transmission of the *saving truth* [emphasis added] in every and any honest translation, so that the Word of God is accessible to all at all times for all ordinary purposes.”³³

Illumination

Sixth, inspiration and preservation still require supplementation. The effects of depravity on the human mind make necessary a further work of God so that man can properly apprehend His revelation in Scripture. This is the work of illumination, variously called *divine enlightening* or, simply, *the regeneration of the mind*. Illumination communicates the significance of the divine message to human recipients; that is, it takes the divine

must be explained in a manner compatible with the mutual and reciprocal dependence of inspiration, canonicity and preservation.

³² Samuel E. Schnaiter explains this idea of the preservation of essential meaning vis-à-vis every word, saying,

There is a purity with regard to the wording of a text that is different from the purity of the message. This merely recognizes that the same thing can be said reliably in more than one way. For example, there is no effect on the meaning of a statement like “she denied her daughter permission to go,” if the wording is altered to read “she refused to permit her daughter to go.” For a textual researcher who is trying to determine which of those was the original wording of a particular author, it is a question of wording purity. He may thereby refer to one text as ‘corrupt’ and the other as ‘pure’ without reference to the substance of the passage” (“Review Article: *New Age Bible Versions*,” *DBSJ* 2 [1997]: 113–14).

³³ “The Westminster Confession and the Original Manuscripts,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), 2:594. See also, John H. Skilton, “The Transmission of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946), pp. 142–43; and Bahnsen, “A Reformed Confession Regarding Hermeneutics,” n.p. [cited 10 September 2007]. Online: <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt173.htm>.

message with its objective meaning and makes such *personal*—illuminating the relationship of the meaning to individuals and their situations.³⁴

Since the unregenerate human mind is depraved, it cannot process spiritual things correctly because it has a native hostility against God and all the things of God. This is known in theology as *noetic sin* (i.e., the effects of depravity on the mind). Therefore there is need for the impartation of life to the spiritually dead mind of man, if the message of Scripture is ever to be received by him. That is to say, the natural man is not able to see himself in light of the written Word of God without illumination. He is (1) congenitally unable to welcome (*dechomai*) the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14); (2) unable to “subject himself to the law of God” (Rom 8:7) and (3) darkened in his understanding (Eph 4:18).

To explain further, illumination removes man’s innate hostility toward God and Scripture and imparts intuitive certainty that Scripture is from God and is, therefore, true and authoritative. In this latter work, illumination bridges the gap between objective reality and subjective certainty, answering the question: “How do we *know* that the Scriptures came from God and are, therefore, true?”³⁵

Further, in illumination the Holy Spirit does not illumine or animate Scripture—somehow making the message itself clearer through further revelation. Rather He enlightens the person, quickening the human intellect so that it has a new capacity. In other words, this illumination

³⁴ The distinction maintained here between *significance* and *meaning* follows the important discussion by E. D. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). “*Meaning* is that which an author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence [i.e., language]; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable” (p. 8).

³⁵ Packer agrees, saying illumination “[opens] . . . minds sinfully closed so that they receive evidence to which they were previously impervious. . . . It is the witness of the Spirit . . . which authenticates the canon to us” (Packer, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy,” p. 143). See also James Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament,” *GTJ* 11 (1990): 29–52.

does not bring perspicuity to Scripture; it allows the formerly darkened mind of a sinner to first grasp the significance of the already perspicuous central message—the gospel (e.g., John 3:16; Rom 3:23; 6:23; et al.)—and then to continually grasp the significance of the whole of Scripture, an ongoing activity that Paul (Eph 1:17–18)³⁶ and John (1 John 3:20, 27)³⁷ both discuss.³⁸

In short, illumination does three things: It provides (1) an intuitive certainty that the Scriptures came from God and are true and authoritative; (2) a removal of the hostility toward Scripture caused by depravity; and (3) an ongoing capacity to understand the significance of Scripture.

Finally, it may again be affirmed that illumination does not discount or eliminate the need for diligent study of the Scriptures. The believer's diligent efforts and the Holy Spirit work together. In fact, Scripture gives evidence of this. For instance, the Lord tells Daniel to “set [his] heart on understanding” divine revelation (Dan 10:12). In another place, Paul

³⁶ Paul here prays “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling.” The “spirit” here is probably a disposition or attitude induced by the Holy Spirit and *not* the Holy Spirit, simply because the Holy Spirit is not given to someone in response to someone else’s prayer and the believers already had Him (1:13) (cf. William W. Combs, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Interpretation of Scripture” [unpublished paper presented in postgraduate seminar in New Testament Theology, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 26 February 1981], p. 13). Further, “revelation” is coordinate or parallel with “the eyes having been enlightened” (perfect, passive participle), which itself is a parenthetical statement clarifying what “the spirit of wisdom and revelation” is. In other words, this is a prayer by Paul for *continued* illumination (cf. also 1 Cor 2:14–15).

³⁷ Here John writes, “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know . . . The anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him” (v. 27). John’s context deals with false teachers who were confusing the believers with false knowledge. This “anointing,” then, symbolically represents the indwelling Holy Spirit, using the figure of oil. When John says that they had “received” this anointing, he is probably referring to initial illumination or the regeneration of the mind. And, this continued teaching ministry (i.e., “His anointing teaches you”), which he says “abides” in them, probably also refers to continual illumination as in Ephesians 1:17–18. For further discussion of this text, see Combs, “The Role of the Holy Spirit,” p. 18.

³⁸ Bahnsen puts this point well: “We affirm that, although unbelievers can understand the literary sense of the Scriptural text, the saving discernment, acceptance, and application of God’s word requires the Holy Spirit’s work of enlightenment, regeneration, bestowal of faith, nurture, and sanctification” (“A Reformed Confession Regarding Hermeneutics,” n.p. [cited 10 September 2007]. Online: <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt173.htm>).

tells Timothy to work diligently so that he might “accurately [handle] the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15) and to “consider” what Paul had said so that “the Lord [would] give [him] understanding” (2 Tim 2:7).³⁹

Interpretation

The last stage in this process is interpretation. While illumination secures the certainty of Scripture’s source and significance, it is, nevertheless, still dependent upon interpretation to uncover Scripture’s meaning.⁴⁰ Also, while inspiration conveys God’s revelation in authoritative form, it too is dependent upon correct interpretation for its authority to be brought to bear on specific situations.⁴¹ Further, the ability to interpret assumes two theological foundations, which will be explored briefly in what follows.

³⁹ Fred Klooster notes similarly: “Just as the biblical writer used his own talents and investigation, so the biblical interpreter must read and study and struggle to understand the biblical text. The more self-consciously active the interpreter is in that process, the more likely is the Spirit’s illumination” (“The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutical Process,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], p. 460). For other excellent resources on illumination, see the following: John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946); idem, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960); John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:70–77; R. C. Sproul, “The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 337–54; Wayne Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁴⁰ Since man is in God’s image, the ability to interpret is available to anyone—believer and unbeliever alike—who employs the proper tools and who understands the received laws of language (e.g., propositions and single meaning). This explains why helpful, scholarly commentaries and study aids are regularly produced by unbelievers. Of course, while available, this ability is tainted by sin, as is evidenced by the unhelpful presuppositions unbelievers employ while interpreting (e.g., denial of supernatural; denial of Scripture’s authoritative claims; et al.).

⁴¹ Satan’s misuse of Scripture in Jesus’ temptation is a notorious example of non-authoritative proof-texting.

The Perspicuity of Scripture

While, in a general sense, the entirety of Scripture is essentially clear, perspicuity is technically argued only for the central message, comprising Scripture's teaching about creation, the Fall into sin, the provision of redemption and the consummation in the eschaton (*last things*). The Westminster Confession puts this point well:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.⁴²

Perspicuity, used in a more general sense, finds support in passages where exhortations are given to search and study the Scriptures. In these, perspicuity is assumed. For instance, God commands Israel to obey His covenant by stressing its inherent clarity: "For this commandment which I commanded you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. . . . But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it" (Deut 30:11, 14). Peter encourages immature Christians to "long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it [they might] grow" (1 Pet 2:2). In a less obvious manner, even the Berean's

⁴² *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.7; J. I. Packer's comments similarly:

The Scriptures are clear, and interpret themselves from within, and consequently . . . are able to stand above both the church and the Christian in corrective judgment and health-giving instruction. . . . No Christian who uses the appointed means of grace for understanding the Bible . . . can fail to learn all that he needs to know for his spiritual welfare ("Biblical Authority," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, p. 144; see also Packer's "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in *Scripture and Truth*, pp. 325–56). As well, G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 267–98; and Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:475–94.

proficiency in understanding the Scriptures presupposes perspicuity (Acts 17:11).

Perspicuity is also demonstrated in texts where the Scriptures are claimed to have accessible profit—illuminating ability. For instance, in Psalm 19:8, David writes, “The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.” He says similarly in Psalm 119 that “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 105), and again, “The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (v. 130; cf. also vv. 18, 33–34). Solomon too stresses this, saying, “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life” (Prov 6:23).⁴³

Scripture never gives the impression that its meaning is withheld from the common believer, due to his inherent inability to understand. Indeed, the opposite is true. The soul liberty of believers—their competence, right and duty to come directly to Scripture by the Spirit—is predicated on the Bible’s essential clarity and its inherent ability to inform the believer’s conscience concerning his belief and practice.⁴⁴

Finally, the epistemological underpinning of perspicuity is the *univocal nature* of human language. Language speaks with “one voice.” This is to say, a given word can only mean one thing at a time; it can have but one signification in any given instance. A word may have a broad semantic range, but it will only use one of its significations in any

⁴³ The Scripture’s essential clarity is also assumed when the prophets and apostles address their various audiences with God’s word (cf. Isa 1:10; Jer 2:4; Ezek 3:1; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; et al.). Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:477.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:478–79.

given usage.⁴⁵ Therefore, without univocality, language is incapable of successfully communicating.⁴⁶

The Sufficiency of Scripture

The other theological foundation that interpretation assumes is the sufficiency of Scripture. Grudem defines sufficiency this way: “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”⁴⁷

Sufficiency goes back to the objectivity of the revelation of God in Scripture. The Bible is a finished and complete revelation entirely sufficient for its divinely intended purpose. It need not be supplemented by reason, experience, tradition, other religions, or anything else. It does not wait to be sufficient until it *encounters* the individual nor does it cease to be sufficient when rejected or ignored by the same.

Those holding to the sufficiency of Scripture in interpretation hold as well to the grammatical-historical-theological interpretation of Scripture. In this method, interpretation consists in finding the meaning of words according to grammar, syntax, and cultural setting and in correlation with the rest of Scripture. In this normal or plain interpretation, the Bible is best allowed to speak for itself.

⁴⁵ Of course, there are times when a word is intentionally used to signify two things, as in equivocation (e.g., a pun). But, even in these circumstances, the equivocation depends upon univocality, upon an assumed single meaning from which the equivocal departure can be made for an intentional purpose.

⁴⁶ Univocality, like propositional revelation, is axiomatic. To deny it, it must be assumed.

⁴⁷ *Systematic Theology*, p. 127.

A more popular method among critical scholarship is the historical-critical method. This method employs an exhaustive search into the literary forms, cultural molds and traditions of Scriptural words and ideas. In this approach, the real authority resides outside the text in these various fields of research. Many proponents of this approach are also philosophical naturalists, denying the validity of miracles and inerrancy, preferring to speak of myth, saga, and legend, not to mention errors, in Scripture.

THE DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION

Having looked at these six stages in the doctrine of Scripture, it is now helpful to examine in more detail the stage of *inspiration*.

The Definition of Inspiration

Warfield's definition is well-put: "Inspiration is . . . a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness."⁴⁸ Louis Berkhof says similarly: "By inspiration we understand that supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Holy Spirit by virtue of which their writings are given divine truthfulness, and constitute an infallible and sufficient rule of faith and practice."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 131.

⁴⁹ *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), p. 41. (Berkhof is obviously borrowing from Warfield.)

The Proof of Inspiration

Theologians often give both biblical and extra-biblical proof for inspiration.⁵⁰ For these theologians, proof for inspiration is purportedly seen in fulfilled prophecy, the influence of Scripture, the indestructibility of Scripture, and, among other things, the integrity of its authors. However, only Scripture's own assertions about its own inspiration are valid and will be considered here.⁵¹

In fact, the entire debate—both about inspiration and, even, inerrancy—boils down to whether or not one accepts Scripture's origin and, subsequently, its claims about itself. Either these are accepted or rejected; there is no middle ground.⁵² It is illegitimate to attempt to drive a wedge between what Scripture says about itself and, say, its central message and what it says about other subjects, such as science. If Scripture is the ultimate and final authority on Jesus and salvation, then it can no less be the final authority on other matters, including its claim of divine origin by the miracle of verbal inspiration.

In sum, Bavinck is entirely correct when he notes that it is, therefore, untenable

⁵⁰ E.g., Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), pp. 191–201.

⁵¹ Again, everything about God is self-referential or self-authenticating. For example, the Father is self-witnessing (Heb 6:13–14), as is the Son (John 8:12–14). God's written revelation is likewise self-attesting. Only God can be a witness to His own written revelation; only the infinite, self-contained, eternal, triune God can accredit the infinite being that He is. To introduce any other ultimate standard by which to proclaim, test, or verify God and His word is either to temporalize the Creator or eternalize some aspect of creation. It cannot be both ways, and in neither case is God's word nor His all-comprehensive program revealed therein well-served.

Further, the way in which Scripture talks about itself is through the message of its contributors. Therefore, when Jeremiah claims divine origin for his message (Jer 1:9), this is tantamount to Scripture making such a claim about itself. It is not simply Jeremiah claiming authority for his 7th century B.C. ministry in Judah.

⁵² See the important essay by Sinclair Ferguson, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 47–66.

to say that the teaching of inspiration, as it is maintained by the Christian church, forms a contrast to what Scripture says about itself. For inspiration is a fact taught by that very Scripture. Jesus and the apostles have given us their witness concerning Scripture. Scripture contains teaching also about itself. Aside from all the dogmatic or scholastic development of this teaching, the question is simply whether or not Scripture deserves credence at this point of self-testimony.⁵³

Scripture's Self-Testimony: The Old Testament's Witness to Its Own Inspiration

The Old Testament is replete with statements about and indications of its own inspiration. For instance, the phrase "then the Lord said to Moses" prefaces each discussion in Exodus 6–14. At other points in the Pentateuch, Moses describes how he was commanded to write in the Law-covenant God's very words: "Write this in a book" (Exod 17:14; cf. 24:4, "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord"). Another example is the way that the Ten Commandments are legitimately attributed both to God and to Moses (cf. Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1, 27–28; Deut 4:13; 9:10; 10:4; 29:1; 30:1; 31:19, 24; cf. also Dan 9:12–13).

Still further, Isaiah says of his prophecy: "Hear the word of the Lord. . . . Give ear to the instruction of our God" (Isa 1:10). Jeremiah similarly says, "The words of Jeremiah . . . to whom the word of the Lord came" (Jer 1:2). Ezekiel too says, "The word of the Lord came to me" (Ezek 3:16). Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai and Zechariah all

⁵³ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:424.

begin with the phrase: “The word of the Lord came to me.” Malachi is no different, claiming, “The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel” (1:1).⁵⁴ These claims evidence a canonical self-consciousness. That is, the prophets were aware that their writings were actually contributing to a corpus of special revelation.

Scripture’s Self-Testimony: Jesus’ Witness to the Inspiration of the Old Testament

Further, the infallible God-man also testifies to the inspiration of the Old Testament. This is clearly demonstrated in the following considerations.

First, Jesus displays remarkable familiarity with the Old Testament, evincing an absolute respect for the literature. Throughout His life, He demonstrates knowledge of scores of events covering the entire period of history the Old Testament comprises. Further, He continually quotes or makes allusions to the Old Testament. In fact, His mind is so saturated with the text of the Old Testament that He spontaneously expresses His own feelings in language drawn from it, crying from the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1).

Second, Jesus attributes absolute and final authority to the Old Testament. For instance, He authoritatively castigates the money changers whom He has chased from the temple with these Old Testament words: “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den” (Matt 21:13; cf. Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11). In the same

⁵⁴ The prophets also make repeated mention of divine commands to “write” the revelation from God (cf. Isa 30:8; Jer 30:2; 36:2–4, 27–32; Hab 2:2). And, there are numerous references in the Old Testament to God’s revelation already existing in written form, evidencing a general canonical consciousness (cf. Exod 17:14; Num 33:2; Deut 5:22, 32; 29:9, 29; 30:9–10, 15–16; 31:24–29; Josh 1:7–8; 8:34; 24:26; 1 Sam 10:17, 25; 2 Kgs 22:8; Neh 8:13).

context, He scolds the chief priests and scribes for their ignorance with the simple inquiry: "Have you never read?" (Matt 21:16). To the same group, a short while later, He asks: "Did you never read in the Scriptures?" (Matt 21:42). And, in another place, Jesus unties the Sadducees' faulty either-or riddle about the woman with seven husbands by turning the tables on them, saying, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt 22:29). Further, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and scribes for their codified tradition, saying, "[You are] invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that" (Mark 7:13). Jesus even censures the devil with responses beginning: "It is written" (Luke 4:4, 8, 10).⁵⁵

Jesus goes so far as to attribute absolute and final authority to the *entire* Old Testament. In other words, He makes no distinction in authority between its various parts. For instance Jesus, using a hyperbolic comparison, explicitly attributes full authority to everything in the Old Testament, saying, "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until *all* is accomplished" (Matt 5:18). And, in another place, concerning the use of *Elohim* in reference to humans, Jesus argues from the lesser-to-the-greater, proving a point from an obscure text and concluding programmatically saying, "The Scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35; cf. Ps 82:6).

Third, Jesus witnesses to the Old Testament's divine origin by asserting that it was necessary for Old Testament prophecy to be fulfilled. That is, He assumes that if the Old Testament was indeed God's Word, then its predictions must come to pass. He gives evidence of this, for instance, in the Garden of Gethsemane when He tells His

⁵⁵ Other examples could be given, e.g., Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:13; 22:31; Mark 10:3; Luke 10:26; 20:17; John 8:17; 10:34; et al.

captors: “This has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures” (Mark 14:49). Before that, during the Last Supper, Jesus says, obliquely referring to Judas, “That the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me’” (John 13:18; cf. also John 17:12). After His resurrection, Jesus chides the two disciples on the Emmaus road for “being slow of heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken” and saying that what had happened to the Christ was “necessary,” having been foretold by Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:25–27). And, this phenomenon is repeated many times over (e.g., Matt 26:31, cf. Zech 13:7; Matt 26:64–65, also cf. Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13).

Fourth, Jesus assumes the validity of the miracles recounted in the Old Testament, implying that He would also assume the miracle of the Old Testament’s divine origin. Jesus actually refers to eleven miracles recounted in the Old Testament. They are the following:

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1. The Creation of Adam and Eve | Matthew 19:3–6 |
| 2. The Noahic Flood | Luke 17:26–27 |
| 3. The Destruction of Sodom | Luke 17:28–29 |
| 4. The Judgment on Lot’s Wife | Luke 17:31–32 |
| 5. The Burning Bush | Luke 20:37 |
| 6. Elijah’s Famine | Luke 4:25 |
| 7. Naaman’s Healing | Luke 4:27 |
| 8. The Bronze Serpent | John 3:14 |
| 9. Manna | John 6:49 |
| 10. Jonah and the Fish | Matthew 12:40 |
| 11. Nineveh’s Conversion | Matthew 12:41 |

In conclusion, E. J. Young summarizes Jesus' witness to the Old Testament this way: "When Christ thus set the seal of his approval upon the Jewish Scriptures of his day, it meant that he considered those Scriptures to be divinely inspired."⁵⁶

Scripture's Self-Testimony: Jesus' Witness to the Inspiration of the New Testament

Jesus not only authenticated the Old Testament as divinely authoritative, He also pre-authenticated the New Testament. That is to say, while none of the New Testament was written while Jesus was on the earth, He was aware of and instrumental in its forthcoming production. In fact, He "ensure[d] that his true witness was passed on pure and unalloyed to humankind. [And,] to that end he chose the apostles."⁵⁷

For instance, Jesus' pre-authentication of the New Testament is seen somewhat indirectly but still validly in the feet-washing episode during the Last Supper. Here Jesus alludes to further revelation that would come apparently after He was gone. In answer to Peter's question whether He would wash Peter's feet, Jesus replies, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter" (John 13:7). "Hereafter" (*meta tauta*: later, after these things) has immediate reference to the events surrounding the cross. However, it also refers to later apostolic revelation, in this case revelation which would explicate the theology of participating with Christ (v. 8, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me").⁵⁸

⁵⁶ "The Authority of the Old Testament," in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946), p. 62.

⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:398.

⁵⁸ In other words, the washing of feet symbolized the present, progressive sanctification or purification of the believer from the recurring defilement contracted by living in a sinful world (v. 10).

In another place, Jesus states plainly to His disciples: “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide *you* into all truth” (John 16:12–13). Shortly thereafter Jesus says, “An hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell *you* plainly of the Father” (v. 25). Jesus says earlier in John 15 that “when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father. . . He will testify about Me, *and you will testify also*, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (vv. 26–27).

As that time of witness-bearing drew closer, Jesus reiterated His intentions to His disciples, telling them they would be divinely-commissioned to bear His message to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8; cf. with Paul’s commission in Acts 16:25 and Eph 3:1–10). It is precisely this witness-bearing that Luke then develops systematically throughout the book of Acts. For instance, Luke records that Judas’s replacement would necessarily be “a *witness* with [the rest of the eleven] of [Jesus] resurrection” (1:22). Peter speaks of himself as such a witness on several occasions. In one case, speaking in Jerusalem, Peter says, “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we all are *witnesses*” (3:14–15). In another place, Peter and John insist to the religious establishment that they “cannot stop speaking *about what we have seen and heard*” (4:20). Luke says at the conclusion of this account that “the apostles gave *witness* to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (4:33, NKJV; cf. also Acts 2:32; 5:32; 10:39; and 13:31).

This divinely-commissioned witness-bearing included the apostolic writings as well. John recognized himself under this capacity, insisting in his writing that he had indeed seen (John 1:14) and known (1 John 1:1–4) the Word made flesh. He also claimed to have been a witness of Jesus’

crucifixion, writing, "He who has seen has *testified*, and his *testimony* is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe" (John 19:35). He even closes his gospel self-consciously referring to his witness-bearing role: "This is the disciple who is *testifying* to these things and *wrote* these things, and we know that his *testimony* is true" (John 21:24; cf. 3 John 12). Peter speaks similarly, writing that he himself is "a *witness* of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet 5:1) and an "eyewitness of His majesty" (2 Pet 1:16).⁵⁹

Not only did Jesus predict and provide for forthcoming revelation, He also gave His disciples a general outline of what this revelation would include, further creating an organic link between His authority and their witness. According to Jesus, this revelation would include the events of His own life and teaching (John 14:26). It would, even more fundamentally, include teaching about His own person (John 16:14–15).⁶⁰ It would also be prophetic, informing the divine witness-bearers of "what is to come" (John 16:13).⁶¹ Furthermore, Jesus indicates in the same place that this witness to Himself would be *final*; the Spirit of Truth would "guide them into *all* the truth" (John 16:13).

Finally, Jesus explicitly stamps His authority on the apostles' future witness-bearing activities.⁶² He does this in John 15:20 when He says that "if they have kept My word, they will keep yours also," implicitly

⁵⁹ Though (probably) not *apostles*, both Luke and the author of Hebrews speak similarly (cf. Luke 1:2; Heb 2:3).

⁶⁰ Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 541–42.

⁶¹ This, then, refers to present-day believers, at the most, only indirectly. No new revelation is forthcoming in the remainder of the church age; there is no predictive prophecy occurring today. Christ is, instead, referring here to the New Testament prophecies concerning the Rapture, the Antichrist, the Tribulation period, the Second Coming, the millennial reign of Christ on David's throne, the demise of the present physical order, the creation of the new earth, and the habitation of the saints during the eternal state. These prophecies are scattered throughout the epistolary and apocalyptic literature of the apostles in the New Testament.

⁶² McClain says similarly: Our Lord "knowing in advance what would be spoken and written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit . . . gave to these future words the same authority as His own" ("The Doctrine of Scripture").

indicating that those accepting His authority would recognize such in the apostles' ministries. He indicates this further in His high-priestly prayer when He prays for those who would "believe in Me *through their word*" (John 17:20).⁶³ In other words, Christ's sheep would hear His authoritative voice through their apostles' witness and follow Him (cf. John 10:27). Jesus puts the final stamp of authority on the apostolic witness by validating the testimony of the final apostolic witness, John. Jesus says at the end of John's letter, a letter that begins with the words "the revelation of Jesus Christ" and "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:1–2), that he "testif[ies] to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book" that what is contained therein bears divine approval (Rev 22:18; cf. also vv. 16, 20).⁶⁴

Here a related question may be asked: Were the other New Testament authors, who were not apostles, pre-authenticated in their task as well? This group of authors were what the New Testament refers to as *prophets* (cf. Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; Eph 2:20; 4:11). And, these prophets did receive new revelation from God (Eph 3:5), and some did indeed write Scripture—Mark, Luke, James and Jude (cf. Rom 16:26⁶⁵). In answer, Paul says that these prophets were chosen by Christ and given to the church for particular purposes, like Paul himself had been (1 Cor 12:28), purposes ostensibly including the writing of Scripture or otherwise. McClain adds further that "the writing of these prophets were accepted by the early

⁶³ Implied here is the fact that in order for "their word" to be the basis for the saving faith (of subsequent generations) spoken of here, it must be faithfully preserved (i.e., an inspired, written record).

⁶⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 1153.

⁶⁵ Paul may well be including himself in "the Scriptures of the prophets." Also, scholars have generally tended to limit this reference to "prophets" to the Old Testament prophets, but this seems too restrictive. This is especially true since Paul is referring to "the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past," signifying material concerning the church which was unavailable to the Old Testament prophets.

churches in an age presided over by the Twelve. Since Christ directly chose the Twelve, His authority reaches down historically to those whose writings were accepted by the Twelve.”⁶⁶

Scripture’s Self-Testimony: The Apostolic and Prophetic Witness to the Inspiration of the Old Testament

The point here is that the apostles and prophets, as with Christ, were conscious of the Old Testament as a divinely-given canon. This can be developed along several lines.

First, these divine witness-bearers appeal to the authority of the Old Testament for their own gospel proclamation. For instance, Paul sets forth the essence of the gospel message, claiming that the whole of it was “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4), with “Scriptures” including the Old Testament literature (cf. also Acts 17:1–2; 18:5; cf. Apollos’ similar argumentation in 18:26).⁶⁷

Second, and similar to the above, the apostles and prophets’ teaching on the Christian life is based on the Scriptures. Paul, for instance, counsels believers against vengeance by appealing to Deuteronomy 32:35 and Psalm 94:1 (Rom 12:19, cf. the author of Hebrews’ similar appeal in Heb 10:30). Peter enjoins personal holiness upon believers by appealing to the Law’s description of God as the Holy One and the One requiring holiness of His subjects (1 Pet 1:15–16; cf. Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; et al.).

Third, the apostles and prophets assume that Old Testament prophecy comprised God’s promises and thus was certain to be fulfilled. This is seen in the instance of choosing Judas’s replacement. Peter writes,

⁶⁶ “The Doctrine of Scripture.”

⁶⁷ This is borne out by Luke’s reference to Philip’s conversation about Isaiah 53 with the Ethiopian eunuch, calling the text under discussion “this Scripture” (Acts 8:32, 35; cf. also 1:16).

“Brethren, the Scripture *had to be fulfilled*, which the *Holy Spirit* foretold by the mouth of David” (Acts 1:16). Both the verb (“had to” from *deo*) and the origin of David’s message (i.e., “the Holy Spirit”) indicate that Peter, and the others, thought Scripture came from God.

Fourth, the apostles and prophets treat God’s words and Scripture as of one piece. In fact, at certain points, the Scriptures are identified as almost extensions of God’s personality. For instance, Paul says, “For the Scripture *says* to Pharaoh,” going on to quote Exodus 9:16. Similarly, he writes to the Galatians: “The Scripture, *foreseeing* that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Gal 3:18). Luke records the early church’s ascribing a psalm of David to the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:25), and the author of Hebrews attributes Psalm 95:7 to the Holy Spirit as well (Heb 3:7). Again, in another place, Paul attributes Isaiah’s words to God (Acts 13:34). Warfield notes here that these texts “indicate a certain confusion in current speech between ‘Scripture’ and ‘God,’ the outgrowth of a deep-seated conviction that the word of Scripture is the word of God.”⁶⁸

Finally, the apostles and prophets regard Scripture as the *oracles* (*logia*) or words of God.⁶⁹ Stephen says that Moses received “living oracles” from God on Sinai which he was then to pass on to Israel (Acts 7:36). Paul talks about this in Romans 3:2 when he describes Israel as having been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (cf. also Rom 9:4–5). The author of Hebrews speaks similarly in a context comprising Old Testament quotations. In this case, he chides his hearers for being “dull

⁶⁸ *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 146.

⁶⁹ Philo’s use of *logia* suggests the living voice of God as it continues to speak in Scripture (cf. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 148). This approximates the idea conveyed by those texts which describe God as *speaking* in Scripture (cf. Acts 13:35; Rom 15:10; Heb 1:6, 7; perhaps also Heb 4:12).

of hearing” and needing a review of “the elementary principles of the oracles of God” (Heb 5:12).

Scripture’s Self-Testimony: The Apostolic and Prophetic Witness to the Inspiration of the New Testament

There are also a few examples of the apostles and prophets giving witness to the inspiration of other apostles’ and prophets’ writings. Peter, for example, links the general apostolic witness with the authority of the Old Testament prophets and, significantly, of Jesus Himself, saying, “This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles” (2 Pet 3:1).⁷⁰ Peter specifically refers to written documents later on, saying,

And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also *the rest of the Scriptures*, to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:15–16).

As Kenneth Gangel says: “The fact that Peter referred to Paul’s letters and then to ‘the other Scriptures’ indicates that Paul’s writings were then considered authoritative Scripture.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ “Your apostles” may indicate that his readers had some contact with other NT apostles; at the very least, it is a reference to himself and to Paul (cf. 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; 3:15–16).

⁷¹ “2 Peter,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983–1985), 2:878. Edwin Blum adds that this is not at all “surprising, for from the moment of composition they

In 1 Timothy, Paul appeals to the authority of both Deuteronomy and Luke's gospel to make a point about pastoral remuneration (5:18). First, quoting Deuteronomy 25:4, Paul says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," implying that an elder is fairly entitled to enjoy some of the material benefits from his work. Paul follows this by saying, "The laborer is worthy of his wages," a quotation of Luke 10:7, clearly indicating that both texts were similar in authority. Homer Kent, Jr., agrees, saying,

No other meaning can be gotten from Paul's construction than that he places both quotations on the same level (joined by *kai*, and) and terms them Scripture (*hē graphē*). Paul wrote this letter in A.D. 62–63, and Luke's Gospel was probably written before A.D. 60. Hence this verse is further evidence that the writings we call the New Testament Scripture were recognized as such during the lifetime of their writers, and we may suggest in many cases from the time of writing.⁷²

Finally, there are even occasions in which the apostles and prophets witness to their *own* authority and, by implication, inspiration.⁷³ For instance, Paul, addressing a misunderstanding about spiritual gifts—specifically, speaking in tongues and prophetic utterances in the public assembly—says, rather abruptly: "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that *the things which I write to you are the Lord's*

had the authority of commands of the Lord through his apostle" ("2 Peter," in vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], p. 288); cf. also Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 14:37; and Gal 1:1.

⁷² *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), p. 184. See also George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 234.

⁷³ This indicates a canonical *self-consciousness* akin to the *prophetic consciousness* of Old Testament prophets.

commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Cor 14:37). In other words, if someone ignored Paul’s apostolic instruction, this was tantamount to his ignoring *the Lord’s authority* and would evidence either a serious lack of spiritual discernment or, worse, a heart of unbelief (cf. 1:18).⁷⁴ Paul speaks similarly to the Thessalonians, telling them that “if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame” (2 Thess 3:14). Further, in 1 Corinthians 2:12–13, Paul claims divine authority for his writing by appealing to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who through him “combined spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” to address the needs at Corinth. Further, the power of the Spirit through the apostolic word brought about the conversion of the Thessalonians and fulfilled Paul’s claim that his word was the Word of God to them (1 Thess 2:13). John also evidences this self-understanding, warning all who would tamper with his prophecy that God would “take away [their] part from the tree of life and from the holy city” (Rev 22:19). John’s warning even calls to mind similar warnings in the Old Testament, further pointing in the direction of his own (and others’) inspiration (cf. Deut 4:2, 5, 14, 40; 12:32; Dan 12:4).⁷⁵

Apostolic self-consciousness and divine authority are also seen when Paul commands that his writings be read in churches. To the Thessalonians he writes, “I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren” (1 Thess 5:27). And, to the Colossians, he writes,

⁷⁴ Cf. W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 277; F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 344–45.

⁷⁵ Additionally, the apostolic and prophetic claims to receiving *mysteries* (cf. Eph 3:2–3) signal a recognition that their own revelation was not only equivalent to but also a completion of—and, thus, in many ways superior to—the Old Testament (cf. also Heb 1:1–2). Importantly, this idea can also be used to argue for a completed or closed canon (see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 64).

“When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans” (Col 4:16). By the same token, these epistles to be read in the churches were also to be *obeyed*: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thess 2:15; see also 1 Cor 14:37–38). Since only the local churches and not individual Christians had the autographs of these letters, their oral reading was mandated, and they carried a self-attesting divine imprimatur that was not to be questioned.

The Nature of inspiration

False Theories of Inspiration

There are a number of false and/or inadequate theories of biblical inspiration. In what follows, a few of these will be examined.

The Degrees Theory

This theory claims that certain parts of Scripture partake of greater degrees of inspiration than others and, subsequently, that inspiration of the lower sort can be equally predicated of extra-biblical material. For example, James Orr argues that the Song of Deborah (Judg 5) stands “on an immensely lower plane than an Isaiah or a Paul.”⁷⁶ Dewey Beegle, on the other hand, compares the level of inspiration in some biblical documents to that (supposedly) found in some well-known church hymns. On one occasion he says the following about the relationship between the Song of Solomon and Isaac Watts’s “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”: “[The hymn] has far greater value in and of itself

⁷⁶ *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1910), p. 178.

than does the Old Testament love song” because the hymn “is grounded in the revelation of Christ’s vicarious death.”⁷⁷ Beegle further speculates that if the hymn-writers George Matheson, Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady or Reginald Heber “had lived in the time of David and Solomon and had been *no more inspired than they were in their own day*, some of their hymns of praise to God would have found their way into the Hebrew Canon.”⁷⁸

In response it should simply be said that a document either *is* or *is not* inspired; there are no levels. And, if it is inspired, it has the fullest extent of the Spirit’s (unlimited) power to effect it.

The Moral Theory

This theory is similar to the previous theory. It likewise argues for levels of inspiration within Scripture. Specifically, it claims that only the moral and spiritual material in Scripture is inspired, such as material directly related to the gospel; simultaneously, it also claims that (so-called) ancillary material, such as discussions of historical or scientific matters, may be erroneous. Proponents reason that Scripture’s purpose is fundamentally to create life, citing 2 Timothy 3:15—“wise unto salvation”, and not to convey truth in other areas. Daniel Fuller speaks of the first category as the inspired “doctrinal” or “revelational” material vis-à-vis the rest of Scripture. He says this of the “doctrinal” material:

These doctrinal verses unmistakably teach that the Bible gives men infallible, inerrant [*sic*] teaching about God, about man’s lost condition, and how he comes to full

⁷⁷ *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 140.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

salvation in Christ. Paul said that the Scriptures are able to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ (II Tim. 3:15), and this can only mean that all the Biblical assertions which teach or rightly imply knowledge that makes men wise unto salvation are absolutely inerrant, for how could fallible statements yield wisdom?⁷⁹

There are a few apparent flaws with this approach, not least being the fact that Scripture claims to be *entirely* inspired (2 Tim 3:16), a subject to be dealt with below. Apart from this, it should be noted, first, that if the Bible is wrong in detail in matters which can be verified, then it may be in greater error in areas where such verification is impossible. It is hard to maintain that a book which contains errors in relatively unimportant matters—be they scientific or historical—can simultaneously be fully trusted in matters of eternal significance.

Second, omniscience, not to mention divine authority, would be needed to maintain this alleged distinction. That is to say, it is not at all clear what criteria one would use to delineate what fits into which category, nor is it clear upon whose authority such criteria and subsequent decisions would rest.⁸⁰ In fact, it is not even clear why it is legitimate to put 2 Timothy 3:15 forth as “revelational” in the first place.⁸¹

⁷⁹ “Benjamin B. Warfield’s View of Faith and History: A Critique in Light of the New Testament,” *BETS* 11 (1968): 80. In a different setting, Fuller disclaims that the Bible *deliberately* teaches (and, thus, accommodates) errors in these “non-theological and non-moral” areas, saying, “My position is that the Bible is not setting forth teaching in its non-revelational aspects” (“Letter to the Editor,” *Christianity Today*, 1 March 1986, p. 21).

⁸⁰ An example of this difficulty is the subtlety of Jesus’ own hermeneutic, displayed when He proved His resurrection by referencing God’s self-description in Exodus 3 (cf. Matt 22:31–32 with Exod 3:6). This is a connection which is easily missed, as Matthew demonstrates (“have you not read,” 22:31). Therefore, the very fact that the Scriptures make such subtle connections would seem to discourage creating any artificial distinctions without divinely-revealed criteria or authority.

⁸¹ Grudem notes in this regard: “It is better to say the whole purpose of Scripture is to say everything it does say, on whatever subject. Every one of God’s words in Scripture was deemed by Him to be important for us, whether or not we understand all of that importance at any one time” (“Scripture’s Self-Attestation,” p. 57).

Similarly, even the so-called non-moral material, which this view delineates, is normally so thoroughly bound up with the so-called moral material (and vice-versa) that these sorts of fine distinctions are nearly impossible to detect and, hence, maintain in practice. The material is all of one piece.⁸²

The Dynamic Theory

This theory says that only the biblical authors' thoughts were inspired, while their choice of words was left to their own discretion.⁸³ One particular application of this theory is found in neo-orthodoxy, a view mentioned above, which claims that Scripture merely records human reflections on historical encounters with God.

The deficiency of this view is its apparent denial of propositional revelation; all thought occurs in propositions which require words. Thought without words is nonsense, in the truest sense.

The Dictation Theory

This view posits that the biblical writers were completely passive, mechanically writing down what God dictated. Interestingly, opponents of inerrancy often claim that this is the view of inerrantists, though the latter have soundly (and repeatedly!) denied this.⁸⁴

⁸² Bavinck says along similar lines: "Word and fact, the religious and historical dimensions, that which was spoken by God and that which was spoken by human beings, [are] so tightly interwoven and intertwined that separation is impossible. The historical parts of Scripture are also a revelation of God" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:438).

⁸³ Cf. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 211, 216.

⁸⁴ For instance, Harold Lindsell insists, "Let it be said succinctly that I do not know of any scholar who believes in biblical inerrancy who holds that the Scriptures were received by dictation" (*The Battle for the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], pp. 32-33). See also J. I. Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). Packer speaks similarly saying,

This "dictation" theory is a man of straw. It is safe to say that no Protestant theologian, from the Reformation till now, has ever held it; and certainly modern Evangelicals do not hold it. . . . It is true that many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

The answer here is two-fold. First, *dictation* is more often than not simply a pejorative term resulting from what non-inerrantists suppose inerrantists must logically believe.⁸⁵ However, inerrantists insist that their view of *concurrent* inspiration is quite different from dictation. Concurrent inspiration insists on the (miraculous) *participation* of both man and God in the writing process.⁸⁶ Similarly, while it is true that inerrantists believe God did indeed dictate certain portions of Scripture, these, they insist, were *exceptional* occasions (cf. Exod 34:1, 27–28; Deut 10:2, 4; Isa 8:1; 30:8; Jer 30:2; 36:1–6). This is demonstrated, for instance, by the clear human-element evidenced by the Scripture’s authors. John Gerstener notes:

Paul is . . . thought to contradict . . . inspiration . . . when in 1 Corinthians 1:16 he says he is unable to remember whether he had baptized any others. But how this in any way, directly or indirectly, denies his [i]nspiration at that moment is never shown. It is merely insinuated. The insinuation seems to be that God could not inspire forgetfulness. But God’s [i]nspiration guarantees only

theologians spoke of Scripture as “dictated by the Holy Ghost”; but all they meant was that the authors wrote word for word what God intended. The language of dictation was invoked to signify not the method or psychology of God’s guidance of them, but simply the fact and result of it; not the nature of their own mental processes, but the relation of what they wrote to the divine intention. The use of the term “dictation” was always figurative (p. 79).

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Randall Basinger and David Basinger, “Inerrancy, Dictation and the Free Will Defense,” *EQ* 55 (1983): 178. In this piece, the authors insist that the human authors must have had *absolute* freedom in the writing process and, therefore, dismiss the concurrent view because it posits “the concept of total divine control over free humans.” Something they insist is “self-contradictory” (*ibid.*).

⁸⁶ Cf. D. A. Carson, “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 5–48. He defines concurrent inspiration as follows: “God in His sovereignty so superintended the freely composed human writings we call the Scriptures that the result was nothing less than God’s words and, therefore, entirely truthful” (p. 45; cf. also p. 29). See also Vern S. Poythress, who calls the same process “organic inspiration” (“The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case,” *JETS* 50 [2007]: 91).

[i]nnerrancy not necessarily total recall. If Paul remembered wrongly we would have an uninspired Paul; but a Paul who does not remember is a Paul who is inspired to record that very fact for our instruction (*presumably, concerning the nature of [i]nspiration, what it does and does not include, what it does and does not exclude [i.e., human personality]*) [emphasis added].⁸⁷

The Biblical Theory of Inspiration

The correct view of inspiration is clearly given in 2 Timothy 3:16. In what follows, three facets of this text will be explored.⁸⁸

The Meaning of "Inspired of God" (theopneustos)

Theopneustos is a verbal adjective used only here in Scripture and literally meaning "God-breathed." Warfield adds:

The Greek term has . . . nothing to say of *inspiring* or of *inspiration*: it speaks only of a 'spiring' or 'spiration.' What it says of Scripture is, not that it is "breathed into by God" or is the product of Divine "inbreathing" into his human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, "God-breathed," the product of the creative breath of God."⁸⁹ Warfield's point is simply that inspiration signifies something produced, not merely invigorated, by God. This after all is the indication

⁸⁷ *A Bible Inerrancy Primer* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1980), p. 44. Packer likewise insists, "God completely adapted His inspiring activity to the cast of mind, outlook, temperament, interests, literary habits and stylistic idiosyncrasies of each writer" (*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p. 79).

⁸⁸ For a more detailed look, see H. Wayne House, "Biblical Inspiration in 2 Timothy 3:16," *BSac* 137 (1980): 54-61.

⁸⁹ *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 131.

Scripture gives in other places. For instance, God talks about Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, saying, "I will put My words in your mouth" (Jer 1:9). Similarly, David says, "The Spirit of the Lord[s] . . . word was on my tongue (2 Sam 23:2). Further, Jesus implies this when He says that man should live "on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).⁹⁰

It seems this word consciously calls forth the well-established idea that God's breath represents His creative power. For example, Psalm 33:6 says, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their hosts." Even further, in the creation account, God's word—"Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen 1:26)—is set in parallel to God's breath—God "breathed into [man's] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (2:7). That is, man's creation was, at the same time, both the product of God's speech and His breath.

This means, therefore, that Scripture is, along with the rest of creation, the product of God's creative power and, therefore, that *theopneustos*—God-breathed—is simply another way of saying the same.⁹¹ Scripture is not simply God-animated; it is God-produced.⁹²

⁹⁰ Here, too, the discussion above on Scripture's self-witness regarding its inspiration is helpful, especially those places where God stands in for the human author as the originator of Scripture (cf. Acts 4:25; Heb 3:7) and in those places where parts of the Old Testament are called "the word of God" or "the oracles of God" (cf. Acts 7:36; Rom 9:4–5).

⁹¹ As Lewis and Demarest say, *theopneustos* "connotes origination by divine power" (*Integrative Theology*, 1:143). See also Walter C. Kaiser, "A Neglected Text in Bibliology Discussions: 1 Corinthians 2:6–16," *WTJ* 43 (1981): 301–19.

⁹² Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 91. This is corroborated, as well, by a text to be explored later, namely 2 Peter 1:19–21. There Peter emphasizes that no prophecy of Scripture was ever borne/carried (*enesthe*, aorist passive of *phero*) by an act of human will (v. 21a), implying by this that the prophecies of Scripture were not products of human invention or ingenuity. Similarly, in the previous verse, Peter says that "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." This phrase could be stated quite literally as, "no prophecy of Scripture *becomes*" ("came about"[NIV], *ginomai*)," which seems to imply Peter is addressing Scripture's origin. In other words, Scripture does not originate or *become* as a result of mere human exposition or contemplation

The Meaning of "Scripture" (graphe)

Graphe is used approximately fifty-times in the New Testament and always refers to Scripture (cf. "sacred writings" in 2 Tim 3:15).⁹³ Here in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul formally teaches that it is *graphe*, not *graphe's* authors, which is God-breathed.⁹⁴

The Meaning of "All" (pas)

The debate whether *pas* signifies "*all* Scripture" or "*every* Scripture" is irrelevant for the present discussion, since they virtually mean the same thing. Further, "all/every" is not limited to the extant Old Testament of Paul's day, but it also includes all the writings that fall within the category of "sacred writings" (cf. 2 Tim 3:15). And, in Paul's day, this category was a growing aggregate (cf. 1 Tim 5:18 and 2 Pet 3:15–16). With this in mind, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is certainly right when he says, "The whole Bible comes to us and offers itself to us in exactly the same way, and as a whole. There is no hint . . . that parts of it are important and parts are not. All come to us in the same form."⁹⁵ Similarly, Geisler asserts that inspiration "extends to every part of the words and all they teach or imply."⁹⁶

(cf. John Murray, "The Inspiration of Scripture," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols., ed. Iain H. Murray [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–1982], 4:46).

⁹³ Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 277. Interestingly, this emphasis on text (i.e., the words) is found throughout the entirety of Scripture (cf. Deut 31:24; Josh 1:8; 8:34; 2 Sam 23:2; 2 Chron 34:14; Isa 59:21; Zech 7:12; Matt 4:4, 7, 10; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 2:13). The text of Scripture is that which "comes out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4), that which is "written" (Matt 4:4, 7, 10), that which is in a "book" (Deut 31:24; Josh 1:8; 8:34; 2 Chron 34:14), and that which was "written in earlier times" (Rom 15:4).

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 278. For an alternative view, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 244.

⁹⁵ *Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1958), p. 35.

⁹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 1:236.

The Method of Inspiration

The primary text which addresses *method* is 2 Peter 1:19–21. There Peter writes:

¹⁹ So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. ²⁰ But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹ for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Here Peter speaks of men who “spoke” as they were “moved [*phero*: borne or “carried along” (NIV)] by the Holy Spirit” (v. 21). Similar language is used by Luke in Acts when he speaks of ships being “driven [*phero*] along” by the wind (27:15; cf. also v. 17). The point seems to reinforce that not only were the human authors recipients as opposed to originators (vv. 20b and 21a) but also that the human authors did not *write* independently of God. Instead, they were moved along by Him.⁹⁷

Of course the objection could be made that Peter refers not what the prophets wrote but only to what they “spoke” (v. 21). If this were the case, then Peter would simply be saying that oral prophetism was God-originated and God-directed. In response, though, it should be noted

⁹⁷ As Kaiser notes, this confluent relationship is also seen in 1 Corinthians 2:13, a text where Paul speaks of the revelation he communicated (both in oral and written form) as being “taught” to him by the Spirit. He says

that [Paul] experienced the work of the Holy Spirit all the way up to the point of verbalizing that message and that these were not at all dictated words, but truth that became part and parcel of his own person, style, vocabulary as a living assimilation of his style, vocabulary, words, and Divine truth took place—they were “taught words from the (Holy) Spirit” (“A Neglected Text in Bibliology Discussions,” p. 317).

See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:432, where he notes that this organic or confluent relationship between God and the human author actually confirms, not destroys, the doctrine of inspiration. God’s Spirit strengthens, not weakens, the activity of the human author.

that written revelation is clearly in view, as the phrase “no prophecy of *Scripture*” implies.⁹⁸

It is important also to note that the product of the Spirit’s ministry is different in the cases of Scripture vis-à-vis oral prophecy/preaching, not least in the fact that one is written and the other is spoken. The difference, however, is still relatively small, as is evidenced by the way Scripture talks about the Spirit’s work in each. Apostolic preaching is, for instance, called speaking “in the Holy Spirit” (Matt 10:20; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Cor 2:10–13, 16; 7:40; 2 Cor 2:17; 5:20; 13:3).⁹⁹ Further, in sending out the Twelve, Christ promises that what they would say would be given them, “For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt 10:20). Paul speaks similarly of his preaching, saying it comes from the Spirit (1 Cor 2:13; 7:40), Christ (2 Cor 2:17; 13:3) and the Father (2 Cor 5:20). Perhaps the best way, then, to put the difference is to say that *inspiration proper* belongs only to the written word; however, besides this, not much, if any, dichotomy may be made.

The Extent of Inspiration

As was argued above, special revelation is propositional and, therefore, necessarily verbal. Consequently, if Scripture (*graphe*) is the divinely-produced (*theopneustos*) record of special revelation, then this

⁹⁸ The author of Hebrews implies this too when he speaks of various avenues of God’s previous revelation: “God . . . spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” (Heb 1:1). These “ways” certainly included God’s speaking through the prophets’ written revelation.

⁹⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:428.

production must extend to its very words. This was pointed to above in the discussion of all (*pas*) in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Here, then, a few more examples should suffice to demonstrate that inspiration produced *every word of Scripture*, an assertion sometimes called *verbal plenary* inspiration. First, Scripture shows that divine revelation does indeed concern itself with *words*. For example, God tells Moses that He “will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered” (Exod 34:1; cf. 31:18). Balaam speaks of his message as something “the Lord [put] in [his] mouth” (Num 23:12; cf. 22:38; 23:5). In another place God promises a line of prophets, significantly climaxing in Jesus, that He “will put [His] words in [their] mouth” (Deut 18:18). Similarly, David says that “[God’s] word was on [his] tongue” (2 Sam 23:2; cf. also Jer 1:5; 1 Cor 2:13).

Second, these words were, at times, also to be written. For instance, God commands Moses to “write . . . in a book” (Exod 17:14). In other places Moses is commanded to write the Law and other related information God wanted preserved (cf. Exod 24:4; 34:27–28; Num 33:2; Deut 12:32; 31:19). This same command was issued to the prophets, whose literature is available today (cf. Isa 8:1; 30:8; Jer 25:13; 30:2; 36:2, 4, 27–32; Dan 12:4; Hab 2:2).

The conclusion stands, then, that Scripture’s inspiration extends to its very words.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, pp. 39–61.

THE DOCTRINES OF INFALLIBILITY AND INERRANCY

Infallibility and inerrancy are correlative to inspiration. In other words, if Scripture is God-authored, then what is authored is naturally and necessarily free from error (*inerrant*) and incapable of failing in its divinely-ordained purpose (*infallible*).¹⁰¹ Admittedly, theologians use these two terms somewhat interchangeably, though, technically the terms are distinct. The distinction is a matter of degree, however, since one could argue that inerrancy *itself* is a necessary inference from infallibility, if the latter comprises the idea of purposing to reveal truth.¹⁰² In what follows, both of these concepts will be more fully developed.

Infallibility

As stated above, infallibility means incapable of failing in purpose and, thereby, possessing final and irreproachable divine authority. E. J. Young puts it this way:

By the term infallible as applied to the Bible, we mean simply that the Scripture possesses an indefectible authority. . . . It can never fail in its judgments and statements. All that it teaches is of unimpeachable, absolute authority, and

¹⁰¹ Cf. Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nodling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), s. vv. "Inerrancy," and "Infallibility," p. 66. Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, defined infallibility similarly as "the certainty that the Word will do what it says" (quoted in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 214). Young adds that "there is no such thing as inspiration which does not carry with it the correlate of infallibility" (*Thy Word is Truth*, p. 109).

¹⁰² Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), s.v. "Infallibility," p. 60.

cannot be contravened, contradicted or gainsaid. Scripture is unfailing, incapable of proving false, erroneous or mistaken. Though heaven and earth should pass away, its words of truth will stand forever.¹⁰³ Young's final line points up that Jesus Himself affirms the unimpeachable authority of Scripture when He says to His disciples that "until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:18). Jesus speaks similarly when He tells the Jews that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

Of course, not every theologian agrees with this idea, even some professing evangelicals. Clarence Bass, for instance, prefers to narrowly define the purpose of Scripture, saying that its purpose is simply to give true revelation of Christ, not to give accurate facts concerning other incidentals.¹⁰⁴ However, there is no discernible biblical or theological basis for this one-dimension infallible purpose. Rather, this preference allows Bass, and others, to affirm some form of biblical infallibility while denying verbal (word-for-word) inerrancy.

The difficulty of such a narrow definition is the lack of objective criteria for determining what comprises "true revelation about Christ." As stated above in the discussion of the "Moral Theory" of inspiration, lacking objective criteria for such decisions is a critical flaw.

¹⁰³ *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁴ "The Relation of Inerrancy to Infallibility in the Scripture" (unpublished essay, Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 1968), pp. 17–18. Stephen T. Davis similarly says that "this notion [of infallibility] says that the Bible is fully trustworthy and never misleads us on matters that are *crucially relevant* [emphasis added] to Christian faith and practice" (*The Debate about the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], p. 118). I. Howard Marshall too seems to limit the Bible's purpose and, therefore, inspiration's scope (*Biblical Inspiration* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], p. 70).

Inerrancy

The Meaning of Inerrancy

Inerrancy means without error. Or, as Grudem more fully states, "The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact."¹⁰⁵ Paul Feinberg approaches the matter from another angle, saying that inerrancy means Scripture is "wholly true," which he admits also means "never false."¹⁰⁶

Here it is important to note that inerrancy argues for *accuracy* of statement, not necessarily *exactness* of statement. Accuracy means that what is affirmed in Scripture is a correct statement of facts or principles. That is, Scripture represents a correct state of affairs by its affirmations. These correct statements, however, are not guaranteed to be exactly put, as Feinberg illustrates: "Inerrancy does not demand strict adherence to the rules of grammar."¹⁰⁷ A. A. Hodge and Warfield agree, saying,

No one claims that inspiration secured the use of good Greek in Attic severity of taste, free from the exaggerations and looseness of current speech, but only that it secured the accurate expression of truth, even (if you will) through the medium of the worst Greek a fisherman of Galilee could write and the most startling figures of speech a peasant could invent.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁶ "The Meaning of Inerrancy," p. 294. Feinberg provides a fuller definition later on, saying, "Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences" (*ibid.*).

¹⁰⁷ "The Meaning of Inerrancy," p. 299.

¹⁰⁸ *Inspiration* (reprint of 1881 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 43.

The point is that the rules of grammar are human conventions, not ultimately binding on God; He is free to communicate by His own conventions. Sinclair Ferguson notes similarly: “Grammar is a matter of custom and development not (normally) a matter of truth and error. In any event, Scripture’s infallibility [by which he seems to mean inerrancy] could not be compromised by grammatical infelicities, any more than its meaning is altered by them.”¹⁰⁹ In sum, inerrancy guarantees truth, not absolute compliance with human conventions.

The Proof of Inerrancy

Does the Bible teach its own inerrancy? Or, as some evangelicals have claimed in recent years, is inerrancy simply a logical deduction made by pious minds? Without question, the Bible teaches its own inerrancy by claiming its own truthfulness. Here, two general lines of biblical evidence will be given in support: (1) The Scripture is explicitly said to be the truth, and (2) the character of the triune God demands that His verbal revelation in Scripture is truth.

Concerning the first, David averred in Psalm 12:6 that “the words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times.” God’s words here refer back to the divine promise of protection in v. 5. His promises are trustworthy because they are “pure” (*tabor*: clean, blameless), having been given a seven-fold purification; that is, they are *absolutely* true. In Psalm 19:7–9, David lists six statements about God’s special revelation in words, each containing a special name, an attribute and an effect of that word. All the adjectives of vv. 7–9 lead to

¹⁰⁹ “How Does the Bible Look at Itself,” p. 63. This point could be illustrated by comparing the accuracy of the following two statements: (1) “I have never killed anyone” and (2) “I ain’t never killed nobody.” While the second statement is unconventional, its meaning is equivalent to the first.

the ideas of absolute truth—perfect, sure, right, pure, clean and true—all synonyms for inerrant. Further, in the oracle of Agur in Proverbs 30:5, the Word of God is said to be “tested” (*tsaraph*), a smelting term carrying the idea of being purified of all dross, refined (NIV, “flawless”).¹¹⁰

Concerning the second, God the Father who breathed out Scripture (2 Tim 3:16) is truth. In an unusual case of Old Testament prophetism, the sorcerer Balaam was made to speak God’s truth regarding Israel, prefacing one of his oracles with “God is not a man, that He should lie” (Num 23:19). The prophet Samuel confronted apostate Saul for his disobedience by announcing the eventual dissolution of his kingdom, a threat made irrevocable by the fact that “the Glory of Israel will not lie” (1 Sam 15:29). John testified that “God is true” (John 3:33, *alethes*: truthful, veracious, honest, dependable, etc.). Paul affirmed the same of God in Romans 3:4: “Let God be found true though every man be found a liar.” He says elsewhere “God cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). The author of Hebrews says likewise, “It is impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18). Also, God the Son, the mediator in inspiration, is truth. Christ’s own testimony is that He is “the truth” (John 14:6). And, God the Holy Spirit, the agent in inspiration, is truth: “It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth [*aletheia*]” (1 John 5:6).

To put it even more simply, the following syllogism proves conclusive: (1) God’s word (i.e., His communication) is completely truthful and inerrant; (2) the Bible is God’s Word; (3) therefore, the Bible is completely truthful and inerrant.¹¹¹ In short, the kind of Bible one believes in is directly proportionate to the kind of God one believes in.

¹¹⁰ NIDOTTE, s.v. “*tsaraph*,” by Robin Wakely, 3:847.

¹¹¹ Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know about Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), pp. 40–41.

Paul Feinberg helpfully suggests the following five-fold proof for inerrancy:

1. **The Bible's Teaching concerning Inspiration**
– 2 Timothy 3:16
2. **The Bible's Teaching concerning the Accreditation of God's Message and Messengers**
– Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22
3. **The Bible's Teaching concerning Its Own Authority**
– Matthew 5:17–20; John 10:34–35
4. **The Bible's Teaching concerning Its Own Use of Antecedent Scripture**
– *The Use of a Single Word*—e.g., “lord” in Matthew 22:43–45; cf. Psalm 110:1; also “gods” in John 10:34–35; cf. Psalm 82:6¹¹²
– *The Tense of a Verb*—e.g., “I am” in Matthew 22:32
– *The Singular Number of a Noun*—e.g., “seed” in Galatians 3:16
5. **The Bible's Teaching concerning the Character of God**
– Titus 1:2, et al.¹¹³

¹¹² Roger Nicole lists 24 such uses in “The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), p. 139.

¹¹³ “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” pp. 277–87.

EXCURSUS 1: INSPIRATION, THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS, COPIES AND TRANSLATIONS

Inspiration Confined to the Original Documents

Inspiration (and its correlate inerrancy) extends only to the original documents (*autographs*), not to subsequent copies (*apographs*) or translations.¹¹⁴ Here three lines of argument will suffice.

First, God's direct involvement with the text—inspiration—occurred only at its inception. For instance, returning to texts discussed above, Peter, it will be remembered, says that Old Testament *Scripture* was that “which *the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David*” (Acts 1:16). Similarly, a group of believers in Acts call the second Psalm something which was spoken “by *the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David*” (Acts 4:25). Paul too says of Isaiah's prophecy: “*The Holy Spirit rightly spoke*” (Acts 28:25). Finally, Paul and Peter say this definitively, respectively in 2 Timothy 3:16 (“*All Scripture is God-breathed*” [NIV]) and 2 Peter 1:21 (“*men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*”).

Second, the various warnings about adding to and subtracting from revelatory texts presuppose that the original documents were guaranteed to comprise God's complete revelation and that subsequent copies were not. Here again God's warning to Moses is apropos: “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you” (Deut 4:2; cf. 12:32). Likewise the Proverbs say that “every word of God is tested; He is a shield to

¹¹⁴ There are two important reasons for limiting inerrancy to the original documents. First, errors in copies and translations reflect on human authors, not on God, since copying and translation are not produced miraculously. Second, errors in copies and translations can (theoretically) be fixed. This would not be the case were errors to exist in the original documents (which are all now lost) (cf. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” p. 297).

those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar” (Prov 30:5–6). Daniel was told to “conceal” his prophecies and “seal up the book until the end time” (Dan 12:4). The idea was that Daniel was to close, shut, stop, or keep secret (*satham*¹¹⁵) the words of his prophecy and issue a certified document so that many could peruse it and increase their knowledge of eschatological events. And, perhaps the most well-known warning is found at the close of John’s revelation: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev 22:18–19).

Third, a similar argument could be made from the warning about (and results of) corrupting the *meaning* or message of the written text. For instance, Jesus upbraided the apostate spiritual and theological leadership of Israel, saying, “You are experts at setting aside the commandments of God in order to keep your traditions” (Mark 7:9). And, He adds in the same breath: “thus invalidating the word of God by your traditions which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that” (Mark 7:13). The rabbis and scribes for centuries had a superstitious attitude toward the text of Scripture, but to circumvent the *message* of the text was in effect to corrupt the text itself.

Further, Paul vindicates his new covenant ministry by saying that he did not “adulterate” the Word of God (2 Cor 4:2) because his service for Christ was entrusted to him by God (2 Cor 3:5–6). As such, his service

¹¹⁵ NIDOTTE, s.v. “*satham*,” by Bill T. Arnold, 3:300–301.

was marked by a transparency and openness before others' consciences that precluded any deceit. To adulterate (*doloo*, to falsify¹¹⁶) the Word of God possibly refers to a mishandling of the Old Testament's message or, more probably, to a falsification of the new covenant gospel in such a manner that denied a complete break with the old covenant.¹¹⁷

In another place, Paul indicates that the Thessalonian believers were confused and apprehensive about the Day of the Lord because someone had perverted the message that Paul had given in his first epistle (2 Thess 2:2). Paul's original *text* had not been corrupted, but the message of truth had been warped so that the end result was the same in either case. In the same letter, the apostle corrected the problem of indolence accompanied by idle gossip (2 Thess 3:11). His handling of the situation included a warning to note anyone not obeying his instruction in the epistle (v. 14). To disobey the epistolary message from God through the apostle was tantamount to a deliberate effort to corrupt and distort the autographic text itself.

In short, it is as contemptible in God's eyes to corrupt the *message* of the Scriptures as it is to tamper with and alter the words themselves. This again presupposes that the original text with its divine message was infallible and divinely authoritative. If not, what is there to corrupt by false religious traditions or otherwise to vitiate by simple disobedience? Even further, why all the warnings in the first place?

Here the point is simply that *meaning* is found in propositions, which themselves comprise words. Therefore, to tamper with meaning one

¹¹⁶ BDAG, s.v. "*doloo*," p. 256.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Phillip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 123.

must corrupt the original revelation's words, presupposing again the complete, uncorrupted state of the original.

Authority Extending to Copies and Translations

Scripture distinguishes the original documents from subsequent copies and translations.¹¹⁸ Still, while distinct in origin, this does not mean that copies and translations are without authority. Rather, it must simply be maintained that the original documents have *primal* or *chief* authority, and that copies and translations have *derivative* inspiration and, thus, authority.¹¹⁹ That is, they derive their inspiration and authority from the original documents. Any appeal, then, to a copy or a translation of Scripture is authoritative because it assumes that the portion appealed to reflects the original text. Obviously, if such were not the case, the appeal would be devoid of authority.¹²⁰

It is important here to note, too, that no one copy or translation *perfectly*¹²¹ reflects the message (much less the words) of the original documents. This is the case simply because the original documents do not presently exist, and the extant manuscripts which do are, in each case, unique, no two fully agreeing in every detail. Therefore, without infallible criteria for determining original readings, infallible determinations of

¹¹⁸ This distinction is maintained on a number of further occasions besides those listed in the previous section; cf. Deut 17:18; Neh 8:8; Prov 25:1; Luke 4:16–21; Acts 17:2, 11.

¹¹⁹ This is normally what people mean when they ask whether their Bibles are *inspired* (or even *inerrant*). Inspiration (and inerrancy) extends to copies and translations only, but nevertheless importantly, in this derivative sense. Derivative inspiration means that manuscripts and versions derive inspiration and authority from other copies in *linear* fashion, in a process that goes back eventually to the autographs themselves.

¹²⁰ An interesting anecdote here is the so-called “Wicked Bible” (1631), which was an edition of the KJV that inadvertently omitted the “not” in the seventh commandment. Transparently, any appeal to this erroneous text would be devoid of authority.

¹²¹ This is not to say that none does so *adequately*, for many do.

original readings are impossible. In sum, copies and translations are authoritative insofar as they faithfully reflect the message of the original text. And, insofar as they do, they may be called the *Word of God*.

EXCURSUS 2: INSPIRATION AND HUMAN AGENCY

As has been shown, inspiration is properly understood as a *concurrent* process, comprising the (miraculous) participation of both man and God in the writing process, as Packer notes: “The Bible is as fully human as it is divine.”¹²² Here it is helpful to briefly explore this human element further.¹²³

Human Language

It must be reiterated that human language is an adequate means of conveying inerrantly the verbal revelation of God. The Bible clearly proves this by equating the human authors’ words with God’s words. For example, the “words of the Lord” and the “words of Jeremiah”

¹²² “The Adequacy of Human Language,” in *Inerrancy*, p. 211. Bavinck notes similarly:

Just as every human thought and action is the fruit of the action of God in whom we live and have our being, and is at the same time the fruit of the activity of human beings, so also Scripture is totally the product of the Spirit of God, who speaks through the prophets and apostles, and at the same time totally the product of the activity of the authors (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:435).

See also Robert Saucy who says, “The full humanity of the prophet—mind, emotion, and will—was involved in this process [of inspiration]” (“Scripture,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003], p. 69).

¹²³ For further resources in this area, see Jack Barentsen, “The Validity of Human Language: A Vehicle for Divine Truth,” *GTJ* 9 (1988): 21–44; A. N. S. Lane, “B. B. Warfield on the Humanity of Scripture,” *VE* 16 (1986): 77–94; Gordon R. Lewis, “The Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 227–64; and B. Warfield, “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 2:543–48.

are used interchangeably in one instance (Jer 36:6, 8, 10, 11). Or, again, Paul's command to the Corinthians is equated with the Lord's word (1 Cor 14:37).

The rationale for the adequacy of human language was discussed in the first chapter. There it was stressed that man was created in God's image and is, therefore, a personal, *communicating* being. In fact, this is presupposed in the opening pages of Scriptures when Moses recounts God's conversations with man (cf. Gen 1:28–30; 2:16; et al.).

Here, though, it may also be said that God's sovereignty makes human language adequate. That is, God created man with his language capacity in order that language might be a sufficient conduit for revelation. Therefore, to say that human language is inadequate is to say God's will and power can be frustrated.

Coupled with these two ideas, it is important to remember that the biblical languages—Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek—are distinctly *human* languages—neither heavenly nor holy. And, the literary forms of the Bible are distinctly *human*, comprising the common human genres of poetry, narrative, apocalyptic, and parable, among others.

One final note is helpful. God does indeed accommodate infinite truths to enable their communication through finite human language. One clear example of this is the occurrence of *anthropomorphism*. Anthropomorphism is a literary device which attributes human, bodily descriptions to God for the purpose of metaphorically illustrating something about Him. For instance, the Scriptures describe God as having eyes (2 Chron 16:9), hands and ears (Isa 59:1), and arms (Isa 30:30) while at the same time affirming that God is an invisible Spirit (John 4:24), not having intrinsic, corporeal form. Thus, these descriptions are clearly metaphorical.

The metaphoric purposes served by these are the following. First, anthropomorphism is indeed a way of accommodating infinite truth about God to finite human understanding. As Ramm notes: "They make the knowledge of God 'picturable,' that is, imaginable and therefore assimilable."¹²⁴ This sort of accommodating language was viewed in Greek philosophy as crude and impure. Interestingly, this thinking may have influenced those who worked on the Septuagint and may explain why some occurrences of anthropomorphism were removed.¹²⁵ A second purpose is that anthropomorphism prepared human minds for the advent of Christ. That is to say, they were earnestness and harbingers of the actual enfleshment of God in human form.¹²⁶

Human Culture

Language and culture are inseparable. Language structures a speaker's environment, and his environment is reflected in his language. Evidence of this interconnectedness pervades Scripture, with each author reflecting his own culture (e.g., various marriage customs, dress, measuring systems, burial customs, etc.). Two questions may be asked: (1) Do these evidences of culture make the Bible a culturally-bound book? (2) Does an author's cultural-situatedness make inerrancy impossible? That is, does the author's sinful culture inevitably infect his message? Both may be answered in the negative. The Bible's ability to transcend culture is related to its ability to communicate infinite truth. And, its

¹²⁴ *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 38.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Calvin J. Roetzel, *The World that Shaped the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), p. 119.

¹²⁶ In this purpose, anthropomorphism is similar to Old Testament *Christophanies* (i.e., temporary appearances of the Son in human form prior to His incarnation).

ability to transcend cultures' errors is related to its ability to (inerrantly) use errant humans in the first place.

On this latter point, some have indeed suggested that Scripture's accommodation to human language necessarily implies an accommodation to cultural errors in its presentation of truth claims. Thus, at times, truth claims must be shelled from the errant cultural husk surrounding them. However, there is quite a difference between accommodating to human finitude and accommodating to error in order to teach truth.¹²⁷

As Warfield says,

It is one thing to adapt the teaching of truth to the state of receptivity of the learner; it is another to adopt the errors of the time as the very matter to be taught. It is one thing to refrain from unnecessarily arousing the prejudices of the learner, that more ready entrance may be found for the truth; it is another thing to adopt those prejudices as our own, and to inculcate them as the very truths of God. It was one thing for Paul to become "all things to all men" that he might gain them to the truth; it was another for Peter to dissemble at Antioch, and so confirm men in their error.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Finitude is not inherently immoral. As Feinberg notes, it cannot be proven that "historical conditioning (i.e., cultural conditioning) and human thought forms necessarily falsify truth" ("The Meaning of Scripture," pp. 282–83).

¹²⁸ *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 195. Grudem lists six reasons why such accommodation is unbiblical. He says that it would (1) "be contrary to the unanimous witness of the Old Testament and New Testament authors concerning the truthfulness of Scripture"; (2) "imply a denial of God's lordship over human language"; (3) "imply that God had acted contrary to His character as an 'unlying God' (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18)"; (4) "make Scripture an eternal witness to the lack of perfect truthfulness in God's speech"; (5) cause God to be an unworthy moral standard for people to imitate; and (6) elevate a summary statement of one of Scripture's purposes to the absolute purpose (2 Tim 3:15); therefore, allowing for accommodation of error in areas not directly related to this main purpose ("Scripture's Self-Attestation," pp. 53–57).

Human Personality

As also discussed above, Scripture gives clear evidence of the human authors' personalities. Their various temperaments, reactions, interests, moods, and styles are everywhere demonstrated. These, it is maintained, are *genuine* expressions of humanity. That is to say, Jeremiah was indeed the "weeping prophet" (Jer 9:1) in contrast to the more reserved, sophisticated Isaiah. Luke's interests as a physician were in some respects genuinely different than those of the other gospel writers (cf. Luke 10:25; 14:1–14). Other examples could be given.

An Analogy: The Humanity and Deity of Jesus Christ

Finally, the analogy of the *incarnate* Son of God may help to explain the complex relationship between the human and divine authorship of Scripture. In the God-man there is a genuine and complete human nature and a genuine and complete divine nature.¹²⁹ The same is true for Scripture; there is, as demonstrated above, both a genuine human aspect and a genuine divine aspect. These two are also united inseparably. Therefore, it would be incorrect to refer to Scripture as having *dual authorship* in the same way as it would be incorrect to refer to Jesus Christ as being *two persons*. In short, the incarnation supports the contention that a similar union of divine and human elements exists in Scripture.

¹²⁹ To be precise, the two natures of Jesus Christ were, while complete and inseparable, nevertheless distinct. Platonism, of course, teaches that there is an *absolute* dichotomy between God and man. The union of the divine and human natures in one person undercuts this notion.

Therefore, it may be affirmed that what the human author wrote and meant, God wrote and meant and vice-versa.¹³⁰

Perhaps this analogy may shed one more ray of light onto the present discussion. As discussed above, it is often wondered how inspiration and its correlate inerrancy are compatible with this human aspect of Scripture. In other words, how is Scripture free from the error, relativity, and the cultural imprisonment humanity in general is subject to? Here it may be suggested that just as Jesus' divine nature personalized and controlled His human nature, so it is with Scripture. That is to say, it must be remembered that the human authors were under God's control. They were, like all human beings, dependent on God, acutely realizing that they were not autonomous and independent. They knew God, understood who He was, and had a profound sense of God's call, giving them an urgency to write God's Word. And, as previously noted, they were providentially prepared by Him for this calling, and they fully recognized that their message originated from God.¹³¹

¹³⁰ It should also be emphasized that just as Jesus Christ's incarnation cannot be fully explained or understood, the same is true for Scripture. And, while helpful, the analogy must not be pressed too far. Scripture's divine aspect is not divine in the same way as Christ's divine person was divine. That is to say, Scripture is *not* an extension or embodiment of the divine essence as Jesus Christ is.

¹³¹ A question that may be asked is whether someone can be a Christian and knowingly deny the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scripture? It does not seem possible. If the Holy Spirit's illumination guarantees a certainty that the Scriptures come from God, then a regenerate individual will not deny it. As John says, "Whoever does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God" (2 John 9). Similarly, Jesus says, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day." Surely these statements include the doctrine of Scripture in their purview. It would appear that Christ places belief in His word on an equal plain with belief in His deity and His perfect humanity. And, the judgment passed on unbelief in these areas is not promising (cf. 1 John 4:1–3).

Chapter 3

THE DISPENSATIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRESS OF GOD'S TRUTH

Since all Scripture is God's Word, Scripture must be understood in its entirety. To do this, one must validly render its many parts into a satisfactory whole. Of course, such a task must be informed by Scripture itself, remembering that God intends to be understood and, thus, that Scripture is self-interpreting.

One such approach, which will be followed here, is dispensationalism. Dispensationalism emphasizes God's progressive self-revelation and the resulting human responsibilities (or stewardships) this revelation generates. One notable outcome of such an approach is a fundamental theological distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church.

The main alternative approach is called *covenant theology*. This approach understands the entire Bible as giving one, progressively-unfolding plan of redemption, a plan beginning with the so-called covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15. One notable outcome of this plan is an emphasis on the one, redeemed people of God, at times calling Israel the *church in the Old Testament* and the church of the New Testament the *new Israel*. In short, in this approach, there is no fundamental distinction between the two groups.

DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

Charles C. Ryrie set the pace for dispensational thought in the latter part of the 20th century with his books and articles. And, his basic thinking is reflected here.¹ Ryrie has given the most definitive and crisp definition of dispensationalism; this will serve well to structure what follows: "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."² The three elements of the definition are helpful to explore in turn.

First, Ryrie emphasizes the idea of an "economy," an English word derived from the Greek word *oikonomia*.³ In fact, three Greek words illuminate what Ryrie means: *oikonomia*, *oikonomos*, *oikonomeo*. These words are collectively used twenty times in the New Testament and refer respectively to the office of a *steward*, the *steward* himself, and the function of *stewardship*.⁴ This, it will be shown, emphasizes that a

¹ I have utilized Charles C. Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) and his revised and expanded *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) as standard textbooks in a seminary course on dispensationalism for over forty years. The fundamental ideas of this section are culled from and organized according to *Dispensationalism*, pp. 23–44. I should also say here that I consider the current revisionism within dispensational ranks begun in the early 1980s and self-styled as *progressive dispensationalism* to be an unwelcome aberration and wholly unsatisfactory as an approach to understanding Scripture. For an introduction to this new approach, see Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victory, 1993); and Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

² *Dispensationalism*, p. 28. Clarence E. Mason similarly says: "A dispensation is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God's mind and will . . . which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God" (*Dispensationalism Made Simple* [Arnold, MO: Shield, 1976], p. 19).

³ Cf. *The Oxford-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Economy," 5:60.

⁴ Cf. BDAG, s.vv. "*oikonomia*," "management of a household"; "*oikonomos*," "be manager" or "hold the office of an *oikonomos*"; and "*oikonomos*," "manager," pp. 697–98. Interestingly, both Jesus and Paul talk about a steward's responsibilities. Both emphasize (1) that two parties are involved (Jesus: Luke 12:42; 16:1; Paul: Titus 1:7); (2) that stewards have responsibilities and are held accountable for such (Jesus: Luke 12:42–43; 16:1–2; Paul: 1 Cor 4:2); and (3) that the stewardship can change (Jesus: Luke 12:45–46; 16:2; Paul: Gal 4:2). Importantly, Paul further emphasizes that a stewardship responsibility can involve revelation from God (1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:2, 9; Col 1:25, 26).

dispensation is a stewardship or management of God's revelation, which is more appropriate than emphasizing a period of time, as many older dispensationalists did, particularly *The Scofield Reference Bible*⁵ and *The New Scofield Reference Bible*.⁶

Second, dispensations are “distinguishable economies.” That is, there are some features in each particular economy that make it sufficiently different from the previous or following economies. The feature creating such distinctions is revelation, specifically *progressive* revelation. In other words, not all revelation calls forth a new economy. For instance, during the fifteen centuries of the dispensation of Law, the various prophets cumulatively gave a vast amount of new revelation, but the content was not progressive in the sense that it fundamentally altered the existing economy.⁷ In fact, despite all this new revelation, Jesus indicates that the relationship begun at Sinai was still operative during His own ministry (Matt 8:2–4; 23:2–3; see also 5:17).⁸

Third, these various economies with their progressive revelation are part of “God’s purpose.” It is God who charts the course for history, dispensing new revelation and inaugurating new economies according to His own will. His purpose in all of this, as in everything else, is expressly His own glory (Rom 11:36)—no higher or greater purpose exists. As such, the various stewardships levy responsibilities on human beings to manage the new revelation in such a way that God receives glory.

⁵ *The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield (New York: Oxford, 1917), p. 5.

⁶ *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. E. Schuyler English (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 3: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God.” This is, however, not to say that *dispensation* and *age* are unrelated. As Paul shows, a new age may bring a particular stewardship to an end (Gal 4:2). It is best to say the terms are related but not interchangeable.

⁷ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 49. Cf. Heb 1:1–2.

⁸ *Dispensationalism*, p. 49. Ryrie also helpfully notes that some features, while found in many dispensations, are not primary features of them (e.g., tests, failure, and judgment, pp. 33–38). This will be revisited later.

Discontinuity: Progressive Revelation

Progressive revelation is the enginery of dispensationalism. This idea of progressive revelation is put forth, for instance, in Hebrews 1:1: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in *many portions* and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” In other words, God’s self-disclosure prior to Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the eschaton was parceled out. God unfolded His revelation according to a two-dimensioned, tandem manner: as He willed to give it and as humans were able to receive it. It is, therefore, this emphasis on progress that prevents a purely linear view of God’s dealings with mankind, as was often reflected in older dispensationalism. Progressive revelation emphasizes the movement of history toward a goal, which Scripture describes as the “fullness of times” (Eph 1:10), a period dispensationalists call the *millennial kingdom*. This idea of progress also helps to emphasize that each dispensation builds upon the revelation that precedes it, creating a staircase approach that rightly sees both discontinuity (i.e., progress) and also continuity.

And, while still a matter of in-house debate, dispensationalism has traditionally delineated seven such economies. The following graphic lists these, along with illustrating the progress and continuity inherent in the approach.⁹



⁹ Paul himself explicitly delineates two economies, while strongly implying a third (Eph 1:10 [Kingdom] and 3:2 [Grace]; also Col 1:25–26 [Law]).

Continuity: Cumulative Revelation

Giving continuity to dispensationalism is the revelation that is brought forward from one dispensation to the next. This revelation remains viable, even though the dispensation in which it was given is past. This emphasizes that the revelation for which man is responsible and by which God manages the progressive economies is cumulative. While cumulative, the revelation or trans-dispensational principle(s) (which Ryrie calls “carryovers”¹⁰) is forwarded either intact or adjusted. And its recognition and viability owe *not* to the continuing authority of a past dispensation but rather to the presence of one of the following four criteria.

First, the revelation of the new economy specifically restates this previous revelation. For instance, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament (Sabbath-keeping is not repeated). Also, the conscience and civil government are still operative in the dispensation of Grace (cf. Rom 2:15 and Rom 13:1–7).

Second, the previous revelation is specifically rooted in God’s nature, as is the case with capital punishment in Genesis 9:6 (the image of God in man). This phenomenon is also seen when Paul tethers women’s subordination in the church to the functional subordination which exists among the persons of the Godhead (1 Cor 11:3).¹¹

Third, the previous revelation is grounded in the natural created order. For instance, transvestism violates this order, specifically the man-woman distinction (Deut 22:5). Further, adultery violates the husband-

¹⁰ *Dispensationalism*, p. 57.

¹¹ One might also add here Paul’s sin lists, which clearly contain trans-dispensational prohibitions grounded in the divine nature.

wife relationship, also founded upon this order (Matt 19:3–9; Eph 5:31; cf. Gen 2:24). Homosexuality too violates this order (Rom 1:26), as do all forms of deviant sexual behavior (cf. Exod 22:19; Lev 20:15–16; Deut 27:21). Other examples could be given (cf. 1 Cor 11:14; 1 Tim 2:12–14).

Fourth, the previous revelation is not specifically abrogated in the new economy. To state it negatively, if revelation from previous dispensations is fulfilled or annulled in a new dispensation, then it—like the Sabbath—is no longer viable.¹²

Continuity and Discontinuity

The new revelation from God and the continuing principles give both continuity and discontinuity to God's one, unfolding plan. As demonstrated, the new revelation which launches a new dispensation gives a measure of discontinuity to God's plan, while the continuing revelation gives a measure of continuity.

Covenant theologians well-account for continuity in their scheme, but they do not allow for any fundamental discontinuity due to their emphasis on the progressively revealed redemptive motif. Because of this, a dispensation in covenant thought is simply a chronological outworking of the *one* covenant of grace.¹³

¹² Paul David Nevin also lists several examples of revelation whose viability extended beyond the economy in which it was given. His evidence can be summed up under the following two heads: (1) the continuation of certain ordinances (such as marriage, animal sacrifice and circumcision) and (2) the continuation of the consequences of divine judgment (such as the Edenic curse and the confusion of languages) ("Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" [Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963], pp. 120ff.).

¹³ Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 293–99. Charles Hodge says that "although the covenant of grace has always been the same, the dispensations of that covenant have changed" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960], 2:373).

*Primary and Secondary Features of a Dispensation*¹⁴

Primary features are those without which there could be no dispensational arrangement. These include specific revelation from God, a governing relationship between God and the world (or a portion thereof), and a corresponding responsibility of man. Secondary features are those without which it would still be theoretically possible to have a dispensational arrangement. These include a test, failure, and judgment, which are factors that, in truth, occur with each dispensation but are not necessary for a dispensation. Older dispensationalism included these as necessary ingredients.

The *test* is similar but not identical to the primary characteristic of human responsibility. In that sense, the test is the same in every economy: Will man obey God and discharge his dispensational responsibilities in faith? A probationary test was in fact an integral part of the first dispensation in Eden, but it seems that it was intended to be a one-time occurrence. That is, it does not appear that Adam and Eve were subject to a test every day until the Fall nor are the people of earth today under an ongoing probation such as were the occupants of Eden. In fact, had Adam obeyed God and not eaten of the forbidden tree, he probably would have been confirmed in holiness and neither he nor his posterity would have been tested again. God could have introduced a new dispensation on a higher plane with new revelation and carried out a complete dispensational program without further testing and without the further possibility of sin.

¹⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 32–35.

A *failure* is also a part of each dispensation but need not have been. Failure is not a necessary feature. Still, while not inevitable, most, if not all, of the economies have climactic failure. Paul Nevin posits failure in each economy in at least two realms: (1) governmental—in that man generally failed to discharge his dispensational responsibilities—and (2) redemptive—in that the man, for the most part, failed to believe God and receive reconciliation and forgiveness.¹⁵

A climactic *judgment* is also not endemic to a dispensational program but can be seen as an occurrence in each of the stewardships, such as the Edenic curse of the dispensation of Innocence, the confusion of languages and dispersion at the Tower of Babel in the dispensation of Civil Government, the Egyptian bondage in the dispensation of Promise, the sack of Jerusalem and dispersion of Israel (both in 586 B.C. and A.D. 70) in the dispensation of Law, and the post-Rapture rise of Antichrist and the ensuing Tribulation period resulting from the apostasy of the professing church in the dispensation of Grace.

Three Irreducible Tenets

There are three irreducible tenets, which Ryrie calls *sine qua non*, that set dispensationalism off as a distinctive approach and which must be present if an approach is to appropriately use the label *dispensational*.¹⁶ Before these essential tenets are discussed, it is helpful first to note three non-essential features.

¹⁵ "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation," p. 89.

¹⁶ With the introduction of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, Ryrie correctly characterized dispensational thought by essentialism, helpfully distinguishing between essential and non-essential features, i.e., primary and secondary characteristics (*Dispensationalism*, pp. 38–41).

First, recognizing distinct economies (and even calling such dispensations) is not an essential feature, not least because it is not an exclusively dispensational practice. Both Charles Hodge and Louis Berkhof speak of dispensations, though, obviously, neither subscribes to dispensationalism. Second, a particular number of dispensations is also not an essential feature. In fact the number of dispensations is an ongoing discussion within dispensationalism.¹⁷ Third, premillennialism is not an exclusively dispensational feature. Many prominent 19th and 20th century commentators and theologians are properly labeled *premillennialists*, but not *dispensational* premillennialists.¹⁸

A Distinction Between Israel and the Church

Therefore, the first essential tenet of dispensationalism is the fundamental, theological distinction between Israel and the church.¹⁹ The distinction is helpfully explored along three lines: origin, purpose and destiny.

¹⁷ See Ryrie's helpful chart of the various suggested proposals (*Dispensationalism*, p. 71).

¹⁸ These are usually labeled *historic premillennialists*, a label which emphasizes this group's alleged representation of the eschatological opinion of the church through history; e.g., 19th century: Franz Delitzsch, J. P. Lange, Henry Alford, S. P. Tregelles, W. J. Erdman, Samuel J. Andrews, J. C. Ryle, and J. J. Van Oosterzee; 20th century: J. Barton Payne, George E. Ladd, Daniel P. Fuller, Clarence Bass, Millard Erickson, and Norman Douy. Furthermore, some (even pretribulational) premillennialists are vocal in their opposition to dispensationalism. See, e.g., John R. Rice, "Not Landmark nor Dispensationalist," *Sword of the Lord*, 15 March 1974, p. 11; and "Editor's Notes—A Whole Reference Bible," *Sword of the Lord*, 16 September 1977, p. 2.

¹⁹ It should be kept in mind that there are, nevertheless, tremendous similarities between the two groups, as Charles Feinberg notes, Both have covenant relations with God. Both are related to God by blood redemption that is centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. Both are witnesses for God to the world. Both are of the seed of Abraham. Both are to be glorified. Both are called to a walk of separation. Both have one shepherd. Both have common doctrines. Both are called the elect of God. Both are dearly beloved of God. Both are vitally related to God as illustrated by the figure of marriage. Both are the recipients of eternal life (*Millennialism: The Two Major Views* [Chicago: Moody, 1980], p. 230).

Origin

Israel began as an ethnic group (the Hebrews) with the call of Abram (ca. 2090 B.C.) and as a spiritual/economic/political group (a theocracy) at Sinai (ca. 1445 B.C.). The church, on the other hand, began as a spiritual group on the Day of Pentecost (1st century A.D.), expressed visibly in local churches. In the former, one's racial status set one apart from (and above) *the other nations*. In the latter, one's spiritual status sets one apart *from the world* (a distinctly spiritual designation; cf. 1 John 2:15–17), not to mention all economic, social and racial preferences are obliterated (Gal 3:28). Furthermore, one became a member of Israel by natural birth or, in unusual cases, by proselytism. On the other hand, one becomes a member of the church by spiritual birth (and Spirit-baptism, 1 Cor 12:13).

Purpose

Israel's purpose was to mediate salvation and model true religion to the nations, bring forth the Messiah and give the Scriptures. Noticeably absent in such a list is any missionary mandate. These purposes were realized principally through national, political means and structures. On the other hand, the church is commissioned to take the gospel to all nations (Matt 28:19–20). And, this purpose is primarily fulfilled individually, through the witness of the church's members.

Destiny

Israel, nationally speaking, has a distinct place in God's purposes. And this place will be realized in the coming millennial kingdom. In this kingdom, Israel, as a nation, will rule over other nations as a mediatorial kingdom of priest (Isa 61:6), fulfilling her original theocratic purpose (Exod 19:6). As for the church, as the bride of Christ, it is destined,

with Christ, to reign over all the millennial nations, including Israel.²⁰ So, while Israel and the church share much of the same *future*, they do not actually share the same *destiny* in that future.

A Consistent Use of Literal Interpretation

This second essential tenet relates to the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. In dispensationalism normal or usual interpretation (historical-grammatical) is employed not only in narrative and epistolary literature but also in prophetic literature. As such, the dispensationalist is convinced that prophetic promises of Israel's future, national restoration were understood as such by the prophetic author and can be abrogated only at his expense.

The Underlying Purpose of God in Human History is His Own Glory

The third essential tenet is dispensationalism's attempt to capture the goal of God's activity in Scripture and history. In claiming a doxological purpose (Rom 11:36), dispensationalism is not claiming to be the *only* approach that claims such. However, it does claim to be the only one that does so comprehensively and consistently. That is, while covenant theology sees redemption tying together the Scripture's disparate parts, the dispensationalist's doxological claim more easily accounts for man's pre-fall condition, the creation of angels, the role of demons and Satan, and Scripture's emphasis on the messianic kingdom.²¹

²⁰ This preeminent place owes also to the church's position as "firstborn" among the saints (Heb 12:23). What is more, this distinction between Israel and the church appears to be eternal (Eph 3:21), something possibly reflected in the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12, 14).

²¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 40–41.

THE DISPENSATIONS

In what follows, the seven dispensations will be discussed, with special attention being paid to the *progressive* revelation that called each forth. These explorations, each beginning with a brief introduction, will be subsequently divided along two lines: (1) new revelation and (2) new responsibilities.

Innocence

This first dispensation began with creation and ended with the Fall into sin. It is labeled *Innocence* not because Adam and Eve were morally ignorant, having no knowledge whatever of right and wrong or because they were morally neutral, neither sinful nor holy. Rather, it refers to Adam and Eve's positive, though *unconfirmed*, creaturely holiness.²² That is to say, they each had a holy nature but not a holy character, something which only comes through experience, by the exercise of obedience in the moral realm.

²² Ibid., pp. 51–52.

New (Initial) Revelation

What follows is a listing of the *recorded* revelation which God gave to Adam and Eve.

- ♦ **The Command to Reproduce and Fill the Earth²³**

Gen 1:28

- ♦ **The Command to Subdue the Earth²⁴**

Gen 1:28

- ♦ **The Command to Rule the Animals²⁵**

Gen 1:28

- ♦ **The Command to Eat Vegetables²⁶**

Gen 1:29–30

- ♦ **The Command to Cultivate the Garden²⁷**

Gen 2:15

- ♦ **The Command to Abstain from The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil²⁸**

Gen 2:17

²³ The word translated in the KJV as “replenish” means to fill (*male*). There is no thought of populating an earth that had been depopulated at some earlier period. The command here is simply intended to result in man’s filling the earth with creatures bearing God’s image, who would glorify God and with whom God would fellowship.

²⁴ This command is sometimes called the *Dominion Mandate*. This *dominion* or *subduing* speaks of the effort and labor that is to be exerted upon the physical earth in order to discover its secrets and treasures for the enrichment of human beings in God’s image. By legitimate extension it can also apply to the heavens. This, then, forms the basis of true science, culture and civilization—that which seeks to explain and harness earthly phenomena in light of God as Creator and man as His creature as explained and informed by divine revelation in the Bible.

²⁵ *Rule* (*radah*) means to master, speaking of man’s natural command over the animal world and the instinctive obedience animals were to render to man. This speaks, too, of the harmonious relationship between man and animals.

²⁶ Moses speaks of God’s *giving* (*nathan*) this herbaceous and fruit diet to man, implying something more than mere permission. Cf. NIDOTTE, s.v. “*nathan*,” by Michael Grisanti, 3:205.

²⁷ Interestingly, this command presupposes a vast amount of knowledge concerning the needs of trees, plants, and flowers, among other things. And it presupposes the need, production, and use of various tools for this task.

²⁸ Again, Adam and Eve were not ignorant concerning good and evil; they simply had no practice in choosing the one over the other. God had given them *descriptive* knowledge of the difference between good and evil, but He also wanted them to have an *experiential*

New (Initial) Responsibilities

Man's responsibility was to obey God, recognizing His lordship and dominion, and thus to become confirmed in holy character. In his self-autonomy, man rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit. God's judgment, then, consisted of the curse on man, woman, the serpent, and the ground (Gen 3:14–19). Sin's introduction also brought separation and death (Rom 5:12), vividly illustrated by Adam and Eve's expulsion from God's presence in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24).

Conscience

The dispensation of conscience extended from the Fall to the Flood of Noah. In it God's rule was mediated through His Spirit's interaction with the human conscience. Of course, the human conscience was operative in the preceding dispensation (and in later dispensations); however it did not previously form the basis for God's rule.²⁹

The key text demonstrating God's method of internal rule in this dispensation is Genesis 6:3:³⁰ "Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.'" ³¹ This verse indicates that God's

knowledge, which could come in one of two ways: obeying or disobeying, God wanted them to obey and thus to have a character confirmed in holiness.

²⁹ Even further, in the dispensation of Innocence, man's conscience was clear, giving an approving verdict to all his actions (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Tim 1:3), something not true of man's post-fall conscience.

³⁰ Cf. Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1992), p. 45.

³¹ Perhaps a better translation of "forever" would be *indefinitely* (as the net has done) and of "strive" would be *rule*. In the latter case, the verb "strive" (*din*) certainly denotes ruling, governing, or administering justice (cf. *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "*din*," by Richard Schultz, 1:938–42). Culver, in fact, ties the verb here with the related verb *shaphat* (to judge or govern) and argues that the chief difference between the two is that *din* is more poetic and elegant (and probably also archaic). He also says that "the chief theological significance of . . . [*din*] is that, apparently like *shaphat*, it embodies the idea of government, in whatever realm, in all its aspects" (*TWOT*, s.v. "*din*," by Robert D. Culver, 1:188; cf. also BDB, s.v. "*din*," p. 92).

rule (“strive”) was not only internal but also that this arrangement was temporary (“one hundred and twenty years”). A further support of God’s internal governance is seen in the “sign” given Cain (Gen 4:15), which was evidently some kind of an attesting miracle accompanying the promise of God’s protection. This was apparently necessary for Cain’s survival since no external authority yet existed which could provide for his safety.³²

New Revelation

The dispensation of Conscience is founded upon two (possibly three) strands of new revelation. First, after Adam and Eve’s failure, God gave them what is called the *protoevangelium*, the first good news (Gen 3:15), reminding them (and all humans) that evil will only be conquered by divine prerogative. Specifically, the first gospel contained a divinely placed antipathy between the serpent (Satan) and the woman (Eve). This was necessary simply because if Eve (or any human) were to receive rescue from depravity and guilt, she must hate Satan.³³ Further, this first gospel also spoke of hatred between the serpent’s seed and the woman’s, referring to the history-long struggle between unbelievers and believers.³⁴ Finally, this first gospel also spoke of God’s final triumph over Satan, personified in the woman’s seed. God tells Satan that “He [the woman’s seed] shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him

³² McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 44.

³³ This obviously intends more than that women would have an innate fear of snakes, regardless of how well that corresponds with reality.

³⁴ Some suggest that this refers rather to enmity between humans and demons.

on the heel" (Gen 3:15).³⁵ In short, this promise (obliquely) indicated that someone, sometime, somewhere, and somehow would fatally defeat Satan and destroy evil (and its effects—guilt and enmity before God) in the process.³⁶

The second strand of new revelation involved the need for blood sacrifice. This is seen both in the coverings God provided Adam and Eve after they sinned (Gen 3:21) and the narrative which soon follows detailing the differing sacrifices of their children, Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–5). While debate exists in the former case, it seems clear that the animal coverings God provided were intended for more than simply clothing, especially since Adam and Eve were not technically naked at the time (Gen 3:7). Even more than this, several additional factors suggest something more than simply clothing was intended here.

First, the implicit death of an animal suggests that a moral penalty was in view, since prior to the Fall there was no sin and, consequently, no death. Second, this death was inflicted by God *Himself*. This seems to imply a necessary penal satisfaction for Adam and Eve's moral guilt. And, third, God's clothing of Adam and Eve suggests the application of the substitute's death in the place of their own (i.e., guiltless animals for guilty sinners). This application also proclaims propitiation, the satisfaction of God's anger.

³⁵ This promise moves from the generic seed of the two lines to the personal pronoun "he" (*hu*), and this person is predicted to deliver a crushing (*shuph*, to bruise or crush) head-blow to Satan and to suffer a temporary wound ("bruise his heel") in the process.

³⁶ That Adam and Eve saw the crucified Christ in this promise is far too sophisticated an assumption. It is based rather in an unjustified importation of later revelation, which certainly does indicate that this One who would deal the crushing blow was none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

In fact, the New Testament is replete with narrative (principally the Gospels) and didactic material which point to Christ's final triumph over Satan. This is especially seen in John's assertion that "the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8; cf. v. 12; 5:18–19; also John 12:31 and 16:11). The author of Hebrews speaks similarly, saying, "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14).

A possible third strand of new revelation relates to Jude's comments in his short epistle (vv. 14–15). In these verses Jude tells of Enoch's prophecies concerning the Lord's coming in judgment on the ungodly. Since Enoch's ministry would have been contemporaneous with this time (Gen 5:18–24), his revelation would necessarily figure into the revelatory structure of this stewardship, though how this would be is impossible to say.

New Responsibilities

Man was responsible to respond to God as His rule was mediated through the conscience. Obedience would result in man's bringing an acceptable blood sacrifice with a heart of trust in the *protoevangelium*. Added to this, of course, were the continuing responsibilities of the first dispensation, namely man's responsibility to "reproduce and rule."³⁷

Unfortunately, this dispensation also tells of climactic failure. Cain refused to bring the prescribed offering and was rejected (Gen 4:3, 7), leading to his retaliatory murder of his brother Abel (Gen 4:8). This in turn gave rise to the godless Cainite civilization, which was marked by sensuality (Gen 4:19) and brutality (Gen 4:23–24). This failure is only eclipsed by the intermarriage of the woman's godly seed (believers) with that of the serpent's ungodly seed (unbelievers), something contributing to the eventual filling of the earth with wickedness and violence (Gen 6:5–12). This climactic failure brought even more climactic judgment as God destroyed all but eight of the human race with a universal flood (Gen 6:13–8:19).

³⁷ NET, Gen 1:28, n. 59

Human Government

The dispensation of Human Government extended from the Flood to Abraham.³⁸ In it, God's rule was mediated through the external, judicial constraints of human government.³⁹

New Revelation

This dispensation consisted of four new strands of revelation.⁴⁰ First and most fundamentally, God instituted civil government, including the ultimate penal sanction of capital punishment (specifically for murder, Gen 9:6). The basis of this latter sanction was that premeditated murder strikes at the very center of the human personality—man as God's image-bearer. Therefore, in response to this sort of crime against both God and man, the murderer must forfeit his life to the state—man in the collective sense (“by *man* his blood shall be shed”).⁴¹ Second, God disclosed that He would place the fear of man in animals (Gen 9:2). This appears to have had a very practical purpose at this particular juncture in human history when the human race was reduced to a mere eight people. That is, in order for mankind to propagate and refill the earth, some sort of protection was needed from the rapacious natures of certain beasts that

³⁸ With Abraham, formal Old Testament dating becomes possible, assuming that the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 do not depict strict father-son descent. Traditionally, Abraham is thought to have left Ur and migrated around the Fertile Crescent to Canaan in the early third millennium B.C. (ca. 2090 B.C.).

³⁹ Some have argued that capital and corporately-inflicted punishment are instinctive and are part of any type of society (extending even to small family units). However, this is not the tenor of Scripture here, which speaks rather of an earlier internal rule in contrast to this post-flood revelation.

⁴⁰ As will be clear, this new economy contained no new redemptive revelation, as the previous economy had (i.e., blood sacrifice). This is problematic for covenant theology since such an approach insists, as stated above, that new redemptive revelation is essential to each economy (especially those with explicit covenantal language; cf. Gen 9:8–17).

⁴¹ It should be assumed that this institution of capital punishment carried with it the requirement for due process. Also, it should also be assumed that it was prescribed for more than simply capital murder offenses.

had survived the Flood in the ark. Third, God permitted man to have a meat diet (Gen 9:3–4).⁴² Fourth, God bound Himself in covenant with Noah and the human race, promising never to send another worldwide flood (Gen 9:8–17).⁴³

New Responsibilities

Man was responsible to rule for God and believe the Noahic covenant. In doing so, he was to protect the sanctity of human life by orderly rule and to cause righteousness to prevail on the earth. Man's failure is again climactic, evidenced by Noah's lack of self-control and, thus, his inability to rule for God (Gen 9:21) and, even more so, by humanity-at-large's refusal to fill the earth (Gen 9:7; cf. 11:4).⁴⁴ The judgment of God culminated in His confusion of human language and the consequent dispersion of the human race (Gen 11:7–9).

⁴² No doubt the apostate pre-Flood generations had no compunction about killing animals for food—much less taking human life for sport (Gen 4:8, 23). Still, it appears to have been God's will that the pre-flood civilizations were to maintain a vegetable-type diet. Why God now permitted the post-flood world to eat flesh is not stated. Rather, a near *carte blanche* is given, with the only restriction being *how* the meat was to be consumed. That is, the blood was to be accorded the sanctity of special handling, apparently in deference to the practice of blood sacrifice as the only avenue of approach to God at that time (Gen 8:20–21). Further, it is interesting to note the contrast between human and animal life here. Human life—as the bearer of God's image—was to be highly valued and protected, while animals could be killed and eaten for food.

⁴³ Some limit the Noahic covenant to this particular promise. However, that seems unduly restrictive. There is no compelling reason which prohibits including Genesis 9:1–7 as well. Also, this promise from God was represented by (given the sign of) the rainbow, a sign that was meant to remind (a highly anthropomorphic expression showing God's condescending graciousness) God of His covenant (Gen 9:14–15).

⁴⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 53.

Promise

The dispensation of Promise⁴⁵ extended from Abraham to Sinai (roughly 2090 B.C. to 1445 B.C.).⁴⁶ The name of, and revelatory basis for, the dispensation comes from the new promise of God to Abraham.⁴⁷

New Revelation

This promise to Abraham, called the Abrahamic covenant, comprised the new revelation of this dispensation. And, this covenant contained three broad provisions. First, God promised Abram (Abraham, Gen 17:5) a seed, a posterity (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:13; 17:2, 6). This promise explicitly enlarged and furthered the promise God had given Adam and Eve following their fall (Gen 3:15).⁴⁸ This promised seed, following the Sethite line (Gen 4:25–26), was traced through Noah, his son Shem, and eventually to Terah and his son Abram (Gen 10:21–31).⁴⁹ Second, God promised Abraham land (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:14, 15, 17; 18:18–21). This land had specifically defined boundaries, extending “from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18),⁵⁰ and it was

⁴⁵ Ryrie also calls this dispensation *Patriarchal Rule*, saying by this that “the governmental feature of the economy is best emphasized” (ibid.).

⁴⁶ This presupposes a transition of undetermined length between the Tower of Babel and Abraham.

⁴⁷ This name is explicitly referred to by Paul when he says the Law of Moses did not “nullify the promise,” which antedated the Law by several centuries (Gal 3:17). The author of Hebrews likewise says that Abraham “obtained the promise” (Heb 6:15) and that he “lived as an alien in the land of promise,” along with Isaac and Jacob who were also “fellow heirs of the same promise” (Heb 11:9).

⁴⁸ This was one of Moses’ key authorial purposes. He wanted to show Israel her roots as a special people of God with a national agenda that only God could plan and execute.

⁴⁹ At this point in salvation-history, saving faith comprised the redemptive implications of the Abrahamic revelation within the generic promise of the coming, Satan-crushing seed of Genesis 3:15.

⁵⁰ The parameters here refer to the southwest border (Egypt) and the northeast border (the northwestern extension of the Euphrates, not the eastern edge of modern Iraq).

Abraham's eternal possession (cf. Gen 13:15). Third, God promised to bless Abraham and to bless others through Abraham (Gen 12:2, 3; also 22:17).⁵¹ This blessing consisted both of temporal, material blessings (Gen 13:2) and of spiritual blessings, which would extend from Abraham to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3; cf. 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). This latter blessing awaits final fulfillment when Abraham’s greater Son, Jesus, rules the world in the millennial kingdom.⁵²

New Responsibilities

Man is given a four-fold responsibility in this Abrahamic covenant. Of course, this responsibility was especially applicable to the patriarchs, but it also applied to any others desiring a right relationship with God (e.g., Melchizedek).

First, man was responsible to believe the promises of the covenant. As in all previous dispensations, faith in God’s revelation was required not only for redemption from sin but also for fulfilling one’s dispensational obligations (Gen 15:6).

Second, man was responsible to receive the sign of the covenant—the rite of circumcision (Gen 17:10, 14, 23). As with most of the biblical covenants, the Abrahamic covenant included a sign as a tangible reminder of the covenant.⁵³ And, this rite was so important that neglect led to the

⁵¹ In the latter case, those who blessed Abraham, presumably indicating their faith in Abraham’s God, would be blessed in return.

⁵² Peter quotes the covenant in preaching to the Jews at Solomon’s portico (Acts 3:25), indicating that this blessing is associated with the “times of refreshing” that will come from the Lord (Acts 3:19). At that future time, Peter indicates that God would send Jesus the Christ, the one who was appointed for Israel’s and the world’s blessing (Acts 3:20).

⁵³ For instance, the rainbow functioned this way for the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:13), the Sabbath functioned this way for the Mosaic covenant (Exod 31:3), and the Eucharistic cup functions this way for the new covenant (Luke 22:20).

covenant member's exile or execution ("cut off from his people," Gen 17:14).⁵⁴

Third, man was responsible to stay separate from the nations. This separation was primarily a prohibition against intermarriage with pagan nations, since such would dilute the promised seed of Abraham and eventually dissolve the covenant, with all its provisions and ramifications.⁵⁵ This obligation is illustrated when both Isaac and (later) his son Jacob are ready to marry. Both of their wives are selected from relatives and *not* from the surrounding Canaanite civilization (Gen 24:3–4, 10; 27:46–28:4). In fact, in the former case, Abraham specifically forbids the selection of a Canaanite woman for his son Isaac.

Fourth, man was responsible to remain in the land of promise. God declares this responsibility to Isaac at a time of famine in Canaan, prohibiting him from leaving Canaan and resettling in the potentially more fertile land of Egypt (Gen 26:2–3a).⁵⁶

This dispensation evidences climactic failure and subsequent judgment as well. Failure is evident in Abraham's lying, unbelief, and (very) presence⁵⁷ in Egypt (Gen 12:10–12). Abraham's failure is evident as well in his sojourn in Gerar during a famine, his repeated, duplicitous performance in Egypt (Gen 20), his lack of faith in fathering a son

⁵⁴ It is true that this practice was not peculiar to Israel. However, it was given a special theological and covenantal significance for God's chosen people. Still, as to why this particular procedure was chosen for the task, the Bible is silent. It was probably tied in some way to the ongoing procreation/propagation of the promised seed of Abraham (see *EDT*, s.v. "Circumcision," by Martin Woudstra, p. 245).

⁵⁵ In fact, this proscription was later laid out in the Mosaic covenant as well (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3–6). And, as Israel's history reveals, it was not heeded, leading to all manner of trouble in Israel's history (e.g., Judg 14:8–20; 15:1–2; 1 Kgs 11:4; Ezra 10; Neh 13:23–29). Interestingly, similar trouble is evidenced in the case of Esau's two Hittite wives (Gen 26:34–35; 27:46).

⁵⁶ Isaac did obey in this instance, bringing a reaffirmation of God's promise of fidelity (Gen 26:3b–4; cf. 26:23–25).

⁵⁷ The later problems with Hagar, whom Abraham acquired in Egypt, seem to support this conclusion (Gen 16), not to mention that upon returning to Canaan Abraham was exceedingly blessed (Gen 13:1–4).

through Hagar (Gen 16), and in his claim that the covenant seed would come through this son (Gen 17:18). Further failure is evidenced by Isaac's deceit in Gerar (Gen 26) and in his son Jacob's deception of his brother Esau (Gen 27).

Climactic failure comes with Jacob's flight to Egypt and Israel's subsequent four hundred year bondage there (Exod 12:40). While God's providence certainly overruled in the person of Joseph (granting Israel favor even after his death), the harshness of life in Egypt (Exod 1:8–14) seems to point to an underlying judgment caused by Israel's unbelief and disobedience, attitudes most notably seen in her egregious, ultimate apostasy (Lev 17:7; Josh 22:17; 23:14–15; Ezek 20:7; Amos 5:25–27).⁵⁸

Law

The dispensation of Law extended from the giving of the Law at Sinai (ca. 1445 B.C.) to the Day of Pentecost (1st century A.D.). The title *Law* comes from the Law of Moses, which was the governing legal instrument mediating God's rule in this age (Exod 19:6). And, it was this Law which provided for the new dispensational arrangement.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The blessing pronounced on Jacob when he started for Egypt during the famine (Gen 46:1–4) may seem contradictory to this point (and Gen 26:1–5). But, God's approval on Jacob's journey to Egypt must be understood in terms of His *permissive* will. Jacob was in Beersheba at the time, the southern outpost of Canaan, which means that he was well on his way to Egypt when God providentially acquiesced and brought eventual order out of the impending chaos. The Egyptian episode was overruled and used by God to accomplish certain benefits. Jacob saw Joseph again and the family was given physical sustenance, the Amorites were given four centuries of divine mercy (Gen 15:16), and Israel was welded into a political entity at Sinai after this period of Egyptian bondage.

⁵⁹ This new arrangement is especially seen by the way Scripture contrasts *Law* with *Promise* (Deut 5:2–3; Gal 3:17).

New Revelation

The new revelation consisted of the Mosaic covenant, a comprehensive law code comprising civil, ceremonial, and moral aspects. While governing life in these three areas, the Law itself was an indivisible unity (Jas 2:10).

New Responsibilities

Israel alone was given this new Law and its responsibilities. For instance, Moses records: "Thus you shall say *to the house of Jacob* and tell *the sons of Israel*" (Exod 19:3). And, God summarizes the giving of the Law, saying, "These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the Lord established between Himself and *the sons of Israel* through Moses at Mount Sinai" (Lev 26:46). Further, concerning the additions to the covenant made on the plains of Moab at the end of the wilderness sojourn, Moses reports: "These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with *the sons of Israel* in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which he made with them at Horeb" (Deut 29:1⁶⁰). The psalmist likewise was restrictive concerning the recipients of the Law: "[God] declares His words *to Jacob*, His statutes and ordinances *to Israel*. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them" (Ps 147:19–20). In fact, one of God's last commandments to Israel in the Old Testament is for Israel to "remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for *all Israel* (Mal 4:4). Paul

⁶⁰ Some dispensationalists see a separate covenant in this text, specifically calling it the *Palestinian covenant* and seeing it as an amplification of the Abrahamic covenant (see Mal Couch, ed., *The Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996], p. 292). I have never been persuaded that such is the case.

similarly affirmed that it was Israel “to whom belongs . . . the giving of the law” (Rom 9:4).

Israel’s (and proselytes’) responsibility, then, was simply to keep the whole Law (Lev 18:5). This meant perfect obedience to the entire Law, all of the time and with perfect motives. Paul affirms this, saying in Galatians 3:10 that “as many as are of the works of the Law [those under the Law’s jurisdiction] are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.’” James, too, talks of total obedience, arguing that disobedience in one area meant disobedience in all areas (Jas 2:10).⁶¹

This dispensation also ended with climactic failure and subsequent judgment. Specifically, Israel attempted to establish her own righteousness and refused to submit to God’s (Rom 10:1–3). God met this systemic failure with the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. However, even greater failure and judgment was to come. Israel crucified God’s promised messiah and this led to God’s rejection of the nation, the delay of His kingdom program (Matt 21:43), and the destruction of Jerusalem and ensuing dispersion of the nation in A.D. 70 (Luke 19:42–44).

Exkursus: Perfect Law-keeping

The mention of the requirement of perfect obedience raises the obvious question: Could the responsibility be fully met? Or, to put it

⁶¹ It must be remembered that the Law, particularly the priesthood it established, stood between the individual Israelite and God. That is to say, there was no individual priesthood of the believer during this time. This is illustrated in a few places. For instance, David talks about the importance of the central altar saying, “They [Saul and his men] have driven me out today so that I would have no attachment with the inheritance of the Lord, saying, ‘Go serve other gods’” (1 Sam 26:19). What David means is that approaching God at any other place and in any other manner except through the central altar and through the established priesthood was tantamount to idolatry (Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 26:2). This was, David feared, the inevitable result of having to flee from Israel. Elsewhere David expressed his intense spiritual thirst for God, concluding with a telling question: “When shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps 42:2). David’s spiritual thirst could only be quenched by coming before the Lord, at the central altar and through the established priesthood.

another way, could anyone actually keep all the Law perfectly (all of the time with perfect motives)? There is a two-tiered answer to the question, one hypothetical and the other actual.

Hypothetically, or in principle, perfect Law-keeping promised acceptance with God. Leviticus 18:5b affirms as much: “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which *a man may live if he does them*; I am the Lord” (cf. Deut 30:16; Neh 9:29; Ezek 18:9; 20:11). To “live” could be understood in a narrow sense to mean the blessings of this temporal life (e.g., longevity) that normally accompanied covenant fidelity (cf. Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16, 33; 28:1–14; Prov 3:9–10). However, it seems difficult to limit its focus this way and to wholly exclude the spiritual dimension. It is true that an Israelite could demonstrate outward acquiescence and conformity to the covenant and enjoy these temporal benefits, even without a renewed heart. But, *true* life in the Old Testament goes much deeper than this to include the redemptive blessings springing from faith in the covenant God and His theocratic king. Moses makes this point clear when he says that the Law indeed offered “life and prosperity and death and adversity” (Deut 30:15) and “life and death, the blessing and the curse” (v. 19). But, this “life” (which did include longevity, cf. v. 20) is predicated upon loving God, obeying His voice, and keeping His commandments (30:16).

Jesus reflects this thinking in his response to the rich young ruler’s question: “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). Jesus’ reply is, “You know the commandments” (v. 20), a statement (seemingly) rooted in Moses’ promise in Leviticus 18:5 and implying that doing the commands brought life. Paul too reflects this thinking saying,

“the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom 2:13) and in another place that the Law “was to result in life” (Rom 7:10).⁶²

On the other hand, *actually*, or in practice, the Law was *not* a means of justification. Paul says, for instance, “if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21) and “if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law” (Gal 3:21). The point of these texts is not to contradict the conclusion above that perfect obedience to the Law brings life. That is, the problem was *not* with the Law; in fact, as Paul says, “the law is holy . . . and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12). Rather the problem was that Law-keepers made the Law “weak . . . through the flesh” (Rom 8:3). In short, human sinfulness prevented perfect obedience to the Law and the life such obedience promised.

Grace

The dispensation of Grace extends from Pentecost until the second coming of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom. The name *Grace* is taken from John 1:17, where John says that “grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ,” and from Ephesians 3:2, where Paul speaks of “the stewardship of God’s grace [that] was given to [him].” The dispensation of Grace is an economy that is especially characterized by the grace that came with the life and death of Jesus Christ; its name does not imply there was no grace previously.

⁶² And, clearly, in Paul’s theology, “life” is equated with justification itself (Rom 2:13; 10:5; Gal 3:21).

New Revelation

The new revelation from God is so vast that it cannot be easily reduced to a nice catalogue. It actually consists of the new provisions, promises, commands, and exhortations that resulted from the life and death of Jesus Christ. This includes how to approach God via the “new and living way” (Heb 10:20), the church as the “new man” (Eph 2:15), and all the accompanying revelation about this new man.

New Responsibilities

Man’s responsibilities in this dispensation are at least three-fold. First, he must receive God’s gift of righteousness, offered to all, through faith (Acts 16:31). Second, he must join himself to a local church. This includes the responsibility to be baptized and the other, related responsibilities of church membership (e.g., attendance, worship, participation in the Lord’s Table, et al.; cf. Acts 2:41–42; Heb 10:25). Third, he is responsible to take the gospel to the world (Matt 28:18–20). This responsibility includes the making of disciples, a term signaling conversion, baptism, and participation in the life of the church.⁶³

Not surprisingly, this dispensation too will end in climactic failure, something especially seen in Paul’s discussion of the great apostasy to come (2 Tim 3:13) and the universally-accepted “lawless one” following the Rapture of the church (2 Thess 2:6–12). Climactic judgment will

⁶³ As stated earlier, there was no missionary mandate in the Old Testament since there was, technically speaking, no universal message of redemption. That is, personal redemption was ethnically-bound, found exclusively in the covenant community of Israel with its special revelation and established priesthood. Jesus speaks to this point when He tells the Samaritan woman that “salvation is *from the Jews*” (John 4:22). This is also seen in Paul’s references to the exclusive benefits of the covenant community (Rom 3:2; Rom 9:4–5) and especially in his discussion of the Gentiles as (formerly) “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:11–12). Now, however, this side of Calvary, a “new and living way” (Heb 10:20; cf. 9:15, 24–28) has been opened, bringing (1) the right of individual priesthood for the believer, (2) a bona fide universal gospel, and (3) the responsibility for believers to proclaim it universally.

again follow climactic failure, most notably in this instance in the seven-year Tribulation.

Kingdom

This dispensation extends from the second coming of Christ, following the Tribulation, to the dissolution of the present heavens and earth. Paul speaks of this time as “the administration suitable to the fullness of the times, the summing up of all things in Christ” (Eph 1:10). Its name derives from the fact that Christ will rule on the earth from David’s throne. In the words of Isaiah, the government of the universe “will rest on His shoulders” (Isa 9:6). This is the golden age of history to which God’s prophets and apostles point and for which humanity was created.

New Revelation

New revelation will come from whatever proceeds from the direct rule and reign of Christ (Isa 2:3). And, as well, there will be a great outburst of revelatory activity at the beginning of this age, specifically coming from God’s elect nation Israel. Joel speaks of this, saying, “It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28–29). Israel will be tasked with diffusing this revelation throughout the world, as Isaiah describes, “And in that day you will say, ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name.

Make known His deeds among the peoples; make them remember that His name is exalted" (Isa 12:4).⁶⁴

New Responsibilities

Man will be responsible to obey the King and receive the blessings of the new covenant. These responsibilities are principally for those in their natural, unglorified bodies (those believers who entered the Kingdom from the Tribulation and those born to these in the Kingdom).⁶⁵ The other citizens of the kingdom (Old Testament believers, the church, and Tribulation martyrs) by this time will be glorified, and, consequently, their sanctification will be complete.

Amazingly, human failure here will be climactic as well, demonstrated by the unnumbered multitudes which follow Satan upon his release from imprisonment (Rev 20:8). To be expected, God's judgment will be climactic and final. Fire will come down from heaven and consume the rebels (Rev 20:9) and, eventually, the heavens and earth as well (2 Pet 3:10). And, with the close of (earth) history will come the end of the dispensational program.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Part of this revelation is the already-revealed blessings and provisions of the new covenant, a covenant to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer 31:31–34).

⁶⁵ It is important here to note that kingdom-rule will not be a re-institution of Mosaic Law. This is principally due to the several missing elements from that Law, namely the Ark, the tablets of the Law and the mercy seat, among other things. And, added to these are some additional elements not found in the Law, specifically the increased dimensions of the temple, the living waters flowing from the temple and the trees of healing (Ezek 40–48).

⁶⁶ Much of the structure of the millennial kingdom seems to be carried over into the eternal state, which is the final and eternal phase of the kingdom of God (Rev 22:1, 3, 5). The eternal state will be a monarchical government, complete with a throne and subjects. In fact, the mention of nations and kings (Rev 21:24) suggests this future, eternal era will also have various gradations of society, ethnic distinctions, and geographical boundaries.

A UNIFYING CENTER TO GOD'S ACTIVITY

As noted, the Bible teaches that whatever God does is always for His self-glory. He exists both *from Himself* (i.e., He is self-existent or uncaused) and *for Himself* (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 15:28b; Col 1:16). There is nothing outside of God with which He can compare/contrast Himself; neither is there anything external to God from which to offset Himself in order to define Himself. He exists in self-contained tri-unity and does all things for His own self-glory.

The question remains whether there is a unifying principle to all of God's activity. That is, is there some kind of rubric that can comprehend all of God's activity external to Himself (i.e., with reference to the universe)? This principle will also include one's approach to the Bible, answering the question: What is the unifying center or theme of Scripture? That is, this unifying center of all of God's activity with reference to the universe will also be the unifying theme of the Bible. The two are correlative and inseparable.

The Difficulties of Finding a Unifying Center

There are several difficulties attending such a project. First, there is the problem of the diversity of the biblical literature. The different genres of the Bible include narrative, wisdom, law, poetry, prophecy, epistle, gospel, et al. Each of these carries its own hermeneutical maxims, making it more difficult to find the central thread of biblical teaching. Is there a certain kind of biblical literature more fruitful and important than another? Second, there is the historical difficulty. God's activity with reference to the universe must be viewed as beginning with creation and

carrying on into the eschaton (the so-called *diachronic* approach). What can unify God's attitudes and work through all of this vast amount of time? Third, there is the problem of the diversity of themes in the Bible. The themes of Scripture generally run along the lines of systematic theology (i.e., the doctrines of Scripture, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels, man, sin, salvation, church, and the end times). How do these contribute to a more ultimate biblical theme? Fourth, there is also the monumental difficulty of constructing a method for finding a unifying center. What criteria should be used that are not arbitrary and selective? Which of the recurring themes of Scripture does one include or exclude? Should the methodology be based on the total number of verses on a topic or on the major peoples involved? Is the secret in comparing Israel's beliefs with those of other religions in the Ancient Near East or the Roman Empire? Is there a theme to be found in one Testament over the other (e.g., perhaps the New Testament should be more authoritative and productive because it is later and has further revelation)?

Pertinent criteria for constructing such a methodology would seem to necessarily include, at the least, the following ideas: (1) patterns of God's stated purpose, such as "I will be their God and they will be My people"; (2) theological importance, that is, those ideas having to do with God and His dealings as over and against isolated events and personalities; (3) historical epochs such as creation, the Flood, the call of Abram, the Exodus from Egypt, the advents of Christ, et al.; (4) major revelation at these epochs such as covenants and other blocks of revelatory information; and (5) comprehensibility, that is, the ability to comprehend *all* of God's activity and revelation. For example a unifying center will need to have its starting point at creation, not at Genesis 3:15,

the Flood or the call of Abram. It will also need to explain God's activity up to and including the eschaton.

A Proposed Unifying Principle/Center

God's ultimate purpose of getting glory to Himself would seem to entail a *goal* to His activity. This goal is that which unifies His activity or becomes the fundamental rationale for what He does in glorifying Himself. The most primitive purpose of God is His activity to glorify Himself, but that purpose should be connected to some less remote, penultimate end on the historical level.

This goal, or unifying center, should also carry the *means* of attaining it. This involves the expending of God's power and influences in order to accomplish this goal on the historical level. In other words, this goal, which becomes the principle of unification, entails a plan of achievement. This plan structures God's activities in accomplishing the goal within earth-history. This plan of achievement is the *dispensational program* of God, the progressive unfolding of divine revelation and the resultant stewardship responsibilities that devolve on mankind.

This goal or principle of unification, with its means of accomplishment, will also be the central theme of Scripture. The Bible is the embodiment or the objective truth-deposit of the propositional, verbal revelation on this or any other subject of divine attitude and activity.

God's ultimate purpose and the unifying principle of His activity is *to glorify Himself by establishing a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship with human beings in His image and dwelling with them forever*. This principle involves a two-fold relationship.

The first aspect is “I will be their God and they will be My people.” This relationship began with the creation of man in/as the image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Cor 11:7). Eventually it was expressed in terms of the covenant (cf. Gen 17:7; Lev 11:45; 22:31–33; 25:28; 26:44–45; Num 15:41; Deut 29:12–13; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:28; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; Zech 8:8; 13:9).

The second aspect is “I will dwell among them.” This relationship began when God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, apparently on a daily basis (Gen 3:8). This must have been in the form of a Christophany (a temporary, pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son in human appearance). God’s “dwelling” with man after the fall into sin was probably in sporadic Christophanies, such as possibly to Cain (Gen 4:9–15), Noah (Gen 6:13ff; 7:16), and others. There was no permanent, visible abode of God until the Glory Cloud and the eventual construction of God’s “house” and “dwelling” (Deut 12:5, 11; Ps 74:7; cf. Exod 25:8; 34:26; Lev 26:11–12; Ezek 37:27; 43:9; Zech 2:5, 10–11; 8:3; Rev 21:3).⁶⁷

This principle or center accounts for all the activities of God external to Himself, such as:

1. **Creation.** The creation of the heavens and the earth was ultimately designed for mankind and culminated in the creation of the man and the woman in the image of God. The image of God enables human beings to enjoy the creation, fulfill God’s mandate to rule the earth, participate in loving fellowship with God and, thus, to glorify Him.

⁶⁷ The Hebrew word for *tabernacle* (*mishkan*) means *dwelling*.

2. **The dispensational program.** This program of stewardship responsibility began with the Dominion Mandate of Genesis 1:26–27 and is forwarded by the progressive, unfolding of God’s revelational light in succeeding dispensations. The dispensational program is the means or structure by which God achieves His goal of a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship. This program culminates in the messianic kingdom of God on earth, which then leads to a transition to the eternal, universal kingdom.
3. **The Fall and redemption.** In the inscrutable wisdom and sovereignty of God, He both permitted sin to enter the universe and provided a means of reconciliation so that He could have fellowship with His image-bearers and be glorified in it all.
4. **The final consummation.** The consummation will be in the eschaton, in the messianic, millennial kingdom and its transition to the eternal kingdom. God and His creation will finally again be in perfect harmony as He rules in loving sovereignty. Each facet of the universe will glorify God to its fullest capacity.

The Implementation of the Unifying Principle: The Dispensations

The Dispensation of Innocence: From Creation to the Fall

The Creation of the Universe and Man (Gen 1–2)

The creation account comprehends especially the earth and its features; it has a general geocentric perspective. However, the creation of

man was the crowning glory of God's creative activity. Thus the creation narrative is not only geocentric but anthropocentric, in that man is the apex of creation. It is fairly evident that the rest of creation is designed to serve man and his activity for his Creator. The supplemental account of creation (Gen 2) emphasizes Day 6, especially the creation and original activity of man. Genesis 1 is somewhat universal and cosmic in scope; Genesis 2 narrows down to human, personal matters.

Man as the Image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Cor 11:7)

Man replicates his Creator on a finite level. Theologians speak of the two aspects of the image of God. There is the formal (or public) and broad aspect which made man a personal, rational and spiritual being. There is also the material (or private) and narrow aspect, which for Adam and Eve included a true knowledge of God and an original righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

The Dominion Mandate (Gen 1:26–28)

As a result of the image of God, man was given dominion over the earth. Adam especially was to exercise God-given lordship over the rest of the creation, including the woman. He was truly the "king of the earth." Adam was to (1) name the animals (Gen 2:19–20) and Eve (Gen 2:23), who was the only member of creation suitable to or complementing him⁶⁸ and (2) care for the Garden (Gen 2:5, 7, 15) and, by implication, the rest of creation, in a husband-led family unit.

⁶⁸ It should also be noted that to name something or someone showed lordship or dominion over the object or person named (cf. Gen 17:5; 32:8).

The Original Fellowship with God (Gen 3:8)

God walked in the Garden apparently on a daily basis because Adam and Eve expected Him to arrive at a particular time. God was ruling in a sovereign relationship of love and fellowship with the creatures created in His image. How long this lasted is difficult to know. It would appear that Day 8 would be the earliest day in which the Fall could have taken place since Day 7 is still a divinely-hallowed day (Gen 2:3). But, more probably, God walked with His image-bearers for several days, if not a little longer. During this time He was receiving the maximum self-glory possible from His young universe. The infinite, uncreated, self-existent, and eternal One walked with the finite, created, dependent, and temporal ones for a while at the very dawn of all time-space-mass relationships.

The Dispensation of Conscience: From the Fall to the Flood

The New Revelation from God (Gen 3:15)

The new revelation was a three-fold promise: (1) God would unilaterally impose an enmity between Eve and Satan; (2) God would also unilaterally place an enmity between believers (the seed of the woman) and unbelievers (the seed of the serpent); and (3) God promised the success and final triumph of the personified seed of the woman. This new revelation was *redemptive* in thrust. This promise eventually looks ahead to the God-man of later revelation and history who would redeem fallen humanity, become head of a new humanity and one day rule the earth as a member of the human race. In all of this the original Dominion Mandate remains in force. Many revelational principles are carried forward into succeeding dispensations either intact or adjusted.

The Goal of the Dispensation

The purpose of this section or “goal” here and in the following dispensations is to demonstrate how the unifying principle of God’s activity is worked out. And this is done by addressing two questions: (1) Of what did the walk of loving fellowship between God and His human image-bearers consist? And (2) how was His rule of sovereignty and thus His ultimate goal effected (i.e., how is the unifying center being implemented or fulfilled)?

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

God’s provision of reconciliation and fellowship was in the promises of Genesis 3:15. Man was to respond to this provision in faith expressed in an animal sacrifice (Gen 3:21; 4:3–4). The sacrifice carried the theological ideas of *satisfaction* and *substitution*. Thus man could in fact have a loving relationship with his Sovereign although not quite in the same sense as before the Fall. Sin was still present.

THE RULE OF GOD

God’s rule at this time was internal, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the conscience. Genesis 6:3 signifies this internal rule: “My Spirit will not rule/govern [Heb: *din*] in man indefinitely [Heb: *’olam*].” In this context the divine warning is announcing that the end of the dispensation and this internal rule will be in 120 years. Led by his conscience, each person was to fulfill the Dominion Mandate as God’s vice-regent on earth and, thus, to glorify Him. This still appears to be through a husband-led and wife-subordinate-but-complementary family unit.

The Dispensation of Human Government: From the Flood to Abraham

The New Revelation from God:

The Noahic Covenant (Gen 9:1–17)

The new revelation consisted of (1) the fear of man put within animals (v. 2); (2) the official permission to have a meat diet (vv. 3–4); (3) the imposition of capital punishment (vv. 5–6); and (4) the promise of no more Noahic-type floods (vv. 8–17). The command to fill the earth with rational beings who are God's image-bearers is reiterated (vv. 1, 7).

The Goal of the Dispensation

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Loving fellowship with God was achieved as before, that is, through faith in God's provision accompanied by an animal sacrifice. There was no new *redemptive* revelation in this economy.

THE RULE OF GOD

After the Flood God introduced the external restraints of human government, including the ultimate restraint of capital punishment. Collective man—man in the governmental sense—was now the vice-regent of God in fulfilling the Dominion Mandate. This more or less replaces the family unit as the main instrumentation of God's rule over planet earth. This external rule presupposed what may be called the rights of due process.

Noah and his sons were sort of a new beginning whereby God could have fellowship with man and rule in loving sovereignty. Noah and his family were to multiply and fill the earth with God's image-bearers

(Gen 9:1, 7). God put a protective hedge around them so the animals would not consume them in their task of carrying out the Mandate (Gen 9:2). God also introduced the restraints of civil government to prevent man from destroying himself through a wanton disregard for human life (Gen 9:5–6). All of this was so that human beings could glorify God by fulfilling the Dominion Mandate in fellowship with their maker and ruler.

The Dispensation of Promise: From Abraham to Sinai

The New Revelation From God: The Abrahamic Covenant

The covenant of promise consisted of (1) a seed or posterity (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:13; 17:2, 6); (2) a land with defined boundaries (Gen 12:1; 13:14, 15, 17; 15:18–21); and (3) great blessing (Gen 12:2, 3).

The Goal of the Dispensation

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

God was to be approached via animal sacrifices at designated places, especially places made sacred by His special appearing (theophanies). The principal text is Genesis 12:7 which concerns Abraham's sacrifice: "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendents I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord who appeared to him." Isaac did the same at Beersheba (Gen 26:24–25), as did Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:17–18; 31:13; 35:1, 7). Other sites for sacrifice were used although the rationale is more difficult to find.

The content of faith took on an extension of the seed of the woman, that is, extending now to Abraham and his posterity. Blessing was through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. All this

was via the covenant in its various reiterations and reaffirmations. This blessing would eventually extend to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). The seed of the woman went from Abel to Seth (Gen 4:25–26), from Seth to Shem (Gen 5), and from Shem to Abram (Gen 10–11). The faith that brought reconciliation and fellowship with God had to comprehend the fact that the personified seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) will be genetically and ethnically tied to Abraham and his seed. Abraham believed this and was justified (Gen 15:6).

THE RULE OF GOD

Through Abraham and his seed would come the personified seed of the woman. The covenant provided for the ultimate fulfillment of the Dominion Mandate by Abraham and his seed and all the families of the earth. The “birthright” in the patriarchal clans seems to concern the heir who would further the promised seed and its attendant heritage. With the birthright was the “blessing,” at least in the case of Jacob and Esau (Gen 27:36). This was tied to the privileges of the covenant and the eventual coming, accomplishments, and rule of the personified seed of the woman and the ideal Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16).

The land promise provided the geographical arena for the descendants of Abraham to enjoy the loving fellowship of God. The land became the “headquarters” for the Dominion Mandate to be fulfilled, and it became the locus for the distribution of the blessings of Abraham and his seed to all the families of the earth.

God’s dominion in the economy of Promise was chiefly through the patriarchal clans where the patriarch was God’s specially designated mediator. Abraham, Job, and others were sort of kings and priests in their families (Gen 14, 21, 22; Job 1:5). These miniature theocracies paved the

way historically and theologically for the formal establishment of God's theocratic rule in Israel and, through Israel, to the other nations of the world (Exod 19:5–6).

In fulfilling the Dominion Mandate the descendants of Abraham in this economy were to stay ethnically separated from the other nations (Gen 24:4; 26:34, 35; 27:46; 28:1, 4) and to remain in the land of promise (Gen 26:1–5). As a token of their fidelity to God in this regard, they were to receive the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant (Gen 17:10–14, 23).

Thus far, in summary, God's rule of loving sovereignty began in a face-to-face, daily fellowship with His created image-bearers during the dispensation of innocence. God ruled the earth through a husband-led and wife-subordinate-though-complementary relationship in fulfilling the Dominion Mandate. With the entrance of sin and the subsequent revelation for the dispensation of Conscience, fellowship with God was predicated on the faith-commitment of the sinner to the divine promise of reconciliation—faith that was expressed in an atoning sacrifice. God's rule in the dispensation of Conscience was internal but evidently still in the husband-led configuration of the original Dominion Mandate.

In the third administration of God's unfolding revelation—the dispensation of Human Government—the structure for spiritual fellowship with Himself remained unchanged. The Dominion Mandate, however, was carried out by mankind in the collective, governmental sense via the God-ordained restraints of civil rule. In the fourth dispensation, Promise, God narrowed His dealings to one man, Abram, a descendant of the seed of the woman through Seth, Noah, and Shem. Fellowship between God and His reconciled-though-sinful image-bearers was on the basis of atoning sacrifice and trust in His promised

blessings through Abraham and his seed. God's rule took on a more visible, concrete, theocratic, king-priest, and civil-spiritual form within the patriarchal clans.

Thus, momentum was growing toward the day when man's stewardship of God's truth in ruling earth as His vice-regent would result in the Sovereign of the universe taking up royal, theocratic residence with the human race and localizing His dwelling among the descendants of Abraham.

The Dispensation of Law: From Sinai to Pentecost

The New Revelation from God: The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic covenant was an indivisible law with three general aspects: civil, ceremonial and moral. There was other revelation given during this dispensation but not of the quality that introduced a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.

The Goal of the Dispensation

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

There was no continuous dwelling of God on earth from Eden onward, only sporadic appearances to various people. However, during the administration of Law, God did come down in the symbolized form of the Glory Cloud and live with Israel (Jer 14:9). This Cloud, sometimes called the Shekinah (the "dwelling"), was the visible symbol of God's theocratic presence and rule among the tribes. It began with the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel out of Egypt and guided them during the wilderness sojourn. Apparently a portion of this Cloud dwelled in the Holy of Holies over the ark of the covenant in the central sanctuary

(Exod 40:34; Lev 16:2). The central shrine had various designations that depicted this living of God among the covenant people, some of which are: (1) the tabernacle and temple (Exod 29:45–46; Num 35:34; 1 Kgs 6:13 [cf. 8:13; 2 Chron 6:1–2]; Pss 26:8; 74:2; 135:21)—the *mishkan* (“dwelling”) is the common Hebrew word for tabernacle; (2) the “dwelling of God’s name” (Deut 12:5, 11 [cf. vv. 14–21; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2]; Neh 1:9; Ps 74:7); and (3) the “house of [Yahweh]” (Exod 34:26); and (4) the “tent of meeting” (Exod 29: 42–43).

Fellowship with God who dwelled in Israel’s midst was through the Levitical forms at the central altar. God could be approached and met at His “house” where He lived and manifested His localized presence. Faith at this juncture incorporated the distinct provisions and injunctions of the Mosaic Law regarding the sacrificial-festal system.⁶⁹

THE RULE OF GOD

The Theocratic Kingdom established at Sinai had a unique civil-spiritual or civil-ecclesiastical relationship. The kingdom had an internal political system headed by a divinely-chosen mediator (Moses), along with elders, judges, and officers. Immediate access to God was available should the written code not be sufficiently understood (Num 5:11–31; 15:32–35). Moses, as head of the civil government, appointed the ecclesiastical personnel, such as priests and the high priest (Num 3:10). The established religion had the support of the state through the tithing system. Worship of any god other than Yahweh was strictly forbidden, carrying the sanction of death (Exod 20:3; Deut 6:4–5; 13:1–18). With the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:16) the monarchy became the permanent

⁶⁹ The Glory Cloud departed in 592 B.C. (Ezek 11), signifying the withdrawal of God’s dwelling with Israel due to her apostasy.

form of the Theocratic Kingdom, and the dynastic rights to the kingdom were given to David and his seed in perpetuity.

The external politics or the foreign policy of the theocracy carried a divinely guaranteed supremacy over the other nations, both economically and politically (Deut 15:6). Israel was not therefore to make foreign alliances; in fact, the foreign policy mandated the extermination of the Canaanite city-state system and the enslavement of nations distant from Palestine (Deut 10:11–15, 16–18).

When the Law was adhered to, that is, when the civil, ceremonial and moral aspects of God's revelation were kept, the Israelites enjoyed the blessing of God who ruled in their midst and who was glorified in their obedience. God's rule through Israel also touched other (pagan) nations who, in isolation from their apostate presuppositions, paid tribute to Israel's God (Exod 15:15–16; Josh 2:9–11; 4:24; 1 Kgs 8:43, 60; Ps 59:13; cf. Deut 2:25).

God's rule has thus dispensationally-progressed from the family unit (Innocence and Conscience), to man in governmental capacity (Civil Government), to the mediatorial headship of the patriarchs in their clans (Promise), and to the tribes of Israel who were forged into a mediatorial kingdom of God on earth at Sinai (Law).

The Dispensation of Grace: From Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ

The New Revelation from God

The new revelation from God was the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus of Nazareth was Immanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14). He was God in the flesh (John 1:14), a one-

for-one revelation of the Father (John 14:9), the very embodiment of the Godhead (Col 2:9). The new revelation that came at this juncture entailed all the accomplishments, commands, injunctions, and mandates that came with the life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, present session, and future return of Jesus Christ. Included in this is the broad area of truth concerning the New Testament church, both its universal and local aspects.

The Goal of the Dispensation

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

To walk with the sovereign God in loving fellowship in this economy is predicated on personal faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). Saving faith now comprehends Jesus of Nazareth as the only way to the Father and salvation (Acts 4:12), that is, saving faith comprehends His cross work and its divine validation by His resurrection from the dead (Rom 10:9). Christ is the “new and living way” to the Father (Heb 10:20); there is no other way. He is the personified Seed of the woman, who crushed the serpent’s head and made full and final provision for God and man to be in fellowship (John 12:31; 16:11; Heb 2:14).

THE RULE OF GOD

The rule of God over the earth in the present dispensation of Grace is being mediated principally through the institution of the New Testament church. The era of the Gospels, the closing years of the dispensation of Law, saw the coming of Jesus Christ, the messianic king on whose shoulders the government of the world would eventually rest (Isa 9:6). He offered Himself to Israel as her promised king and in so doing offered the nation the prophesied messianic kingdom (Matt 12:28; Mark

1:14–15; Luke 17:21). His kingdom was rejected and postponed/delayed to the end times (Matt 21:43; John 19:15). The chief instrumentality of God's work and witness in the ensuing dispensation of Grace (i.e., during the interregnum of the king's absence) is, then, the local New Testament church; it is the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). That is, the fate of divinely revealed truth has been committed by God to this body during this particular economy.

The church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles called out by God as a people for His name (Acts 15:14). The church is a unique organism in which Jew and Gentile are on a plane of equality before God, that is, there are no ethnic, social, or gender preferences before God in the composition of the body of Christ (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:6). The church is the bride and wife-to-be of the messianic king himself, destined as such to be co-regent with him on David's throne in the messianic reign (Rev 3:21). Meanwhile, the church mediates the will and rule of God on earth principally in its proclamation of the truth of God and in the salt and light of its individual people in civil society (Matt 5:13–16; 28:18–20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). As a member of both church and state—in a spiritual and civil capacity—man is to fulfill the Dominion Mandate in exercising lordship over the creation to the glory of God. Every foreign or unchristian thought is to be brought into obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). From the Melchizedekian-right-hand rule on the Father's throne, Jesus dispenses spiritual blessings and power to His people (Ps 110:4; Acts 2:33–35; Heb 6:20; 7:1ff; 8:1ff). These are to be translated into good works which glorify the Father (Matt 5:16) and become a savor of the knowledge of Christ in every place (2 Cor 2:14). Human government also still has the obligation to restrain sin, punish evildoers, and cause

righteousness to prevail in an orderly society (Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13–17).

As far as God's visible or symbolic dwelling among men in this economy is concerned, there is none, and there will be none until the consummation when Christ raptures His church and later comes to earth to dwell among mankind during the Millennium. In this present dispensation of Grace, the Holy Spirit, in a sense the alter ego of Jesus Christ during His absence (John 14:16–18), through His personal indwelling of Christians, mediates the things of Christ (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7; Col 1:27). But there are no theophanies, Christophanies or any other visible manifestations or symbols of God's presence on earth.

The Dispensation of the Kingdom: From the Second Coming to the Dissolution of the Present Earth

The New Revelation from God

The new revelation will consist of all the information that comes from the direct rule and reign of Jesus Christ on earth (Isa 2:3; Joel 2:28). Part of this will be the blessings of the new covenant, which will be instituted with national Israel (Jer 31:33–34).

The Goal of the Dispensation

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Fellowship with God will be on the basis of the new covenant as instituted through the atonement of Jesus Christ. All the elements of salvation will be present during this time, such as repentance, forgiveness, regeneration, justification, and sanctification. Salvation, in all its facets and applications, will be as available and plentiful as drawing water from

an inexhaustible well (Isa 12:1–6). The citizens of the kingdom will be clothed with the “garments of salvation” (Isa 61:10). The walls of the international capital of the kingdom will be called “salvation” (Isa 60:18). The messianic king will be known worldwide as “the Lord our righteousness” (Jer 23:6).

THE RULE OF GOD

The messianic kingdom is the historical goal and unifying center of God’s activity. At that time, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9). The messianic king, Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, will take up His royal residence in the millennial Jerusalem. The Glory Cloud, the visible symbol of God’s theocratic presence, will return to the millennial temple (Ezek 43:1–6). God will again be dwelling with His image-bearers in near-perfect conditions worldwide.

The Dominion Mandate will be fulfilled by a basically regenerated society. There will be a complete sanctification of human existence and all earthly relationships. Even the most insignificant and lowly utensils will be holy to the Lord (e.g., the bells on the horses’ harnesses and common cooking pots, Zech 14:20–21). As Alva J. McClain puts it: “No legitimate aspect of human life will be left without the regal saving activity.”⁷⁰

The millennial kingdom merges into the eternal, universal kingdom on the sinless new earth (1 Cor 15:24; Rev 21, 22). Here, then, is the final and eternal consummation of the goal and unifying center of God’s activities. God’s ultimate purpose of receiving exclusive self-glory throughout the entire universe will be realized. Everything and everyone

⁷⁰ *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 217.

will be in absolute visible conformity to God's will and design, and all opposition will be incarcerated forever in God's eternal penitentiary, thereby forcing even from these an everlasting confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil 2:11). The eternal state is in the form of a kingdom with the "throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1), where His servants will serve Him and will *reign* forever and ever (Rev 22:3, 5).

The sacred writer summed it all up by saying of that eternal day: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them" (Rev 21:3).

Part 3



THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Chapter 4

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

THEORIES AND IDEAS ABOUT GOD AND THE REALM OF THE GODS

Because of the image of God in man, the human race has always endeavored to account for God, the gods, the realm of the transcendent, or some ultimate reality. Except for the true God of the Christian Scriptures, of course, all other so-called gods and god-postulates are the offspring of apostate thinking. In the history of religion, there have arisen various such apostate constructions, of which the following list is representative.

- ♦ **Animism:** This is the belief in a multiplicity of spirits. It teaches that nothing is ultimately inanimate but that all things (man, animals, plants, rocks, etc.) are actually alive with spirits that are either beneficial or detrimental to mankind. Animism is closely related to dynamism, which holds to the existence of an all pervading, impersonal life energy useful for good or evil purposes.
- ♦ **Fetishism:** This is the belief that a spirit may temporarily dwell in an inanimate object, and the object is, therefore, sacred because the spirit lives there. Idolatry is similar to fetishism, except that the spirit dwells permanently in the particular inanimate object.

- ♦ **Pantheism:** This is the belief that god is all and all is god. All reality is god; everything is a manifestation of god.¹
- ♦ **Panentheism:** This is the belief that god and the physical universe each need each other for integrity and each are in a state of becoming. God is in the universe as one's mind is in his body.²
- ♦ **Henotheism:** This is the belief that many gods exist; however, one god is both superior to and is to be worshipped to the exclusion of the rest. Examples of this are found in the Old Testament, such as the Ammonites' worship of Molech, the Moabites' worship of Chemosh, the Canaanites' worship of Baal, and the Babylonians' worship of Marduk. Some critics even (wrongly) suggest that Yahweh was such a tribal deity to Israel. (Monolatry is almost identical to henotheism.)
- ♦ **Polytheism:** This is the belief in the existence of many gods, all of whom are to be worshipped.³
- ♦ **Monotheism:** This is the belief that one god exists and is to be worshipped. In biblical thought, this God is personal (i.e., He is not an abstraction or a philosophical postulate) and ethical (i.e., He is not an amoral or immoral being). He is distinct from the universe, yet is in it. He is the planner, Creator, sustainer, and controller of all things. He is tri-personal. And, He has revealed Himself in many ways.

¹ A. H. Strong's theory of ethical monism holds that everything is a finite, progressive manifestation of divine life. This life is the Logos, Jesus Christ. As he says, "the universe exists within the bounds of Christ's being" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907], p. 311; cf. also pp. 105–10; 677, 843). Although Strong denied any connection with pantheism, his protests never convinced orthodox theologians.

² J. Carl Laney, Jr., "God," in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 149.

³ A. A. Hodge says that polytheism "distributes the perfections and functions of the infinite God among many limited gods" (*Outlines of Theology* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], p. 47).

- ♦ **Deism:** This is the belief in one god who is removed from the world. This god created the world but has since abandoned it and sustains no present relationship with it. Since this god does not interact with the world, he is rarely worshipped or prayed to. In contrast to pantheism above, deism locks god out of the universe while pantheism locks him in.

DEFINITION OF GOD

Despite his ethical monism, Strong has given the best theological definition of God: “God is the infinite and perfect spirit in whom all things have their source, support, and end.”⁴ The Westminster Shorter Catechism says similarly: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”⁵

PROOF OF GOD’S EXISTENCE

The Biblical Assertion and Assumption

The Bible begins and ends with the assertion and assumption of God’s existence—“In the beginning God” (Gen 1:1). Scripture simply declares to man what he already knows in his heart—that God *is*. Gordon

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, p. 52.

⁵ *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3:676–77.

Lewis and Bruce Demarest put it this way: "The forthright manner in which God is presented in the first chapter of the Bible leads us to believe that the fundamental concept of God was the common property of all people from the very beginning."⁶

The Bible has no formal arguments or proofs for God's existence. In fact, philosophical atheism is unknown in Scripture; the only atheism discussed is *practical* atheism: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Pss 14:1; 53:1). And, this is not so much a statement denying God's existence as it is a statement denying God's relevance. That is, it is a confession that God is unnecessary.

As was argued earlier, the source of systematic theology is the Protestant canon alone; therefore, God's existence will be demonstrated here *scripturally*. And, only a critique of the traditional philosophical proofs will be given.⁷

Traditional Proofs: Contrasting Perspectives

The so-called proofs go back, basically, to the Roman Catholic theologian and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1224/25–1274), whose ideas were brought over into Protestant theology by Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752) and William Paley (1743–1805). The idea behind the proofs is that one can reason his way independently (from divine revelation) to a knowledge of God's existence. All that is necessary is an unprejudiced

⁶ *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:67.

⁷ For a more detailed account of the various proofs, see A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 71–89; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–), 2:77–91; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 26–28; Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 66–80; J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 1:81.

mind willing to examine objective “facts.” Aquinas held that man’s mind is blank at birth but has the innate capacity for knowledge through a series of “first principles” (e.g., being is not non-being; non-being cannot cause being; et al.). Aquinas developed “five ways” by which one could arrive at a true knowledge of God via these first principles: (1) from motion to an “Unmoved Mover”; (2) from a contingent being to a “Necessary Being”; (3) from degrees of perfection to a “Most Perfect Being”; (4) from effects to a “First Cause”; and (5) from design to a “Designer.” The assumption in each case was that the “g/God” proved was indeed the Christian God.

Aquinas’s scripturally-independent proofs rested upon his view of the relationship between nature and grace. For Aquinas, the sphere of nature was unaffected by the Fall and was the arena in which human reason (and *natural* theology) operated. For Aquinas, God added to this sphere an upper story of grace, the arena of special revelation, an arena that *was* affected by the Fall. The net result was that Aquinas made man’s mind autonomous, and as such, nature eventually devoured grace in Renaissance philosophical humanism.⁸

The biblical portrait of the relationship between nature and grace is, however, drawn differently. It presents the knowledge of God as being innate and universally recognized (if still suppressed). In short, man’s knowledge of God is both independent and in defiance of reasoning or speculative proofs. Most theologians, however, use these or other proofs but fail to recognize the severe theological (hamartiological and logical) limitations of their method.

⁸ In contrast, the Reformers insisted upon a *total* fall and argued that only God was autonomous (cf. Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968], pp. 9–29).

In contrast, Strong helpfully speaks of God's existence as a "first truth" or a "rational intuition."⁹ A first truth is knowledge which must be assumed or supposed in order to make any observation or reflection possible. Strong is entirely correct because, as has been said, man has an innate knowledge of God. Strong goes on to say: "We cannot *prove* that God is; but we can show that, in order to [prove] the existence of any knowledge, thought, reason, conscience in man, man must *assume* that God is."¹⁰ Although not what Strong intended here, his statement is a good summary of what Christian philosophers and apologists call the *transcendental method* (reasoning from the impossibility of the contrary). This argument says that without the indubitable presupposition or first principle of the existence of the biblical God, nothing else can adequately be accounted for.

So, again, returning to the innate knowledge of God, this leads to the assertion that the source of this knowledge is human *nature*. According to Charles Hodge, "the mind is so constituted that it perceives certain things to be true without proof and without instruction."¹¹ This is not to say that man's mind is born with stored-up truths which lie dormant until called forth on due occasion. Rather, as Bavinck notes, it is an "innate cognition" or "innate disposition," which refers to a capacity, aptitude, or inclination to obtain knowledge of God apart from proof or argumentation.¹² Bavinck says further that this knowledge is "implanted" by God and "innate," meaning that "every human being, in the normal course of his or her development, *must* come to it. . . . The moment they

⁹ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 52–62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960), 1:192.

¹² *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:71.

hear that there is a God and a difference between good and evil they must assent to these statements. They cannot do otherwise because they are self-evident.”¹³

This also implies that this innate knowledge of God is rationale in source. It is not a product of the senses or anything external. It involves the mind; it is, as Paul says, “clearly seen” and “understood” (Rom 1:20).¹⁴ And, it implies that this knowledge, being part of *human* nature, is universal and necessary. It is a truth present to every human mind and every human is forced to assent to it.¹⁵

Traditional Proofs: Explored and Critiqued

The above contrast in perspectives nicely preludes the following list of four traditional proofs for God’s existence.¹⁶ These will be briefly explored and critiqued. And the discussion will be rounded out by some further reflections on proofs in general.

¹³ Ibid., 2:72.

¹⁴ Cf. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:36.

¹⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:196–99.

¹⁶ These proofs and others were more commonly found in earlier theologians’ discussions of God’s existence. However, some recent discussions mention them as well. See, e.g., Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 1:27–41. Geisler extensively develops the cosmological, teleological, ontological, and moral arguments for the existence of God. This is part of his “metaphysical precondition” for doing theology. His conclusion is that “the God of theism can be established by sound reasoning. Further, He is distinct from all other views of God, since there can only be one indivisible, infinite, necessary, absolutely perfect Uncaused Cause of everything else that exists” (p. 41); also J. Carl Laney, “God,” pp. 140–43; and Robert A. Pyne, “Humanity and Sin,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), pp. 648–49.

The Cosmological Argument

This proof asserts that every effect must have a cause and, as such, that there must be a *First Cause*, which is assumed to be God.¹⁷ To put it another way, this proof says that the world is an effect; therefore, it must have had a cause outside itself adequate to account for its existence. This argument, however, begs the question, assuming what is to be proved; because by labeling the world an *effect*, a cause is then already assumed. Further, this argument must answer the question of how the cause of all things is itself uncaused—the Unmoved Mover. In fact, it must also give reason for how an (unmoved) mover can move something else without moving itself.¹⁸ Herman Hoeksema notes correctly: “There is an infinite difference between Cause and Creator,”¹⁹ because a creator is *freely* and sovereignly related to its effect (the universe), whereas a cause is *necessarily* related to its effect (the universe).

The Teleological Argument

This proof asserts that humans by-and-large admit that the universe reveals design and purpose. And, such order bespeaks the existence of an intelligent Designer. This proof advances beyond the cosmological argument by positing intelligence and purpose of the g/God postulated. In fact, it was this idea of design that held evangelical theology and modern science (i.e., faith and reason) together until the rise of Darwinism.

Still, as one recent, conservative scholar wrote: “This [argument] does not, of course, prove the existence of God, but it does present

¹⁷ Buswell seems to suggest this proof is not precisely cause/effect, but is rather based on the existence of the *cosmos*. He avers that if something (e.g., the cosmos) exists, it must either be eternal or it must be that something came from nothing.

¹⁸ Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 70.

¹⁹ *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), p. 44.

circumstances in which belief in an intelligent Designer is certainly reasonable. *The universe may exist by a very lucky accident* [emphasis added], but affirming that with any confidence would have to be an act of faith.”²⁰ Further, there are some things in the universe that seem to outwardly defy the idea of design, namely death, disease, conflict, and foolishness. Darwin’s ideas of overproduction, natural selection, the struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest cast doubt on any idea of *designed* universe.²¹ Perhaps, from a different angle, some may even suggest that nature itself is the intelligent designer. In short, the teleological argument does not necessarily lead one to a g/God *outside* the universe who created it,²² not to mention the possibility of the universe being a “very lucky accident” renders the whole argument from purpose or design invalid.

The Anthropological Argument

This proof is also called the *Moral Argument of Oughtness and Justice*. It says that human concepts of justice, ethics, and moral order presuppose a moral law, which itself presupposes a moral lawgiver. Some suggest that the anthropological argument should be separate from this moral argument, saying the former is meant simply to contrast man with animals and to argue that God must be purposive, intelligent, and self-conscious. Interestingly, Immanuel Kant was so impressed with the moral law that he postulated God to account for it.²³

The moral argument has a biblical and empirical reality to be sure; nevertheless, a God-postulate is faulty for a couple of reasons. One, the

²⁰ Pyne, “Humanity and Sin,” p. 12.

²¹ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 131, 134, 135, 141.

²² Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 46.

²³ Granted, he also concluded that God was unknowable.

God postulated, in Kant's case, was actually abstract and impersonal. What is more, Kant did not believe that God was an object of cognitive, propositional knowledge. The God of the Bible, however, is both personal and knowable. Two, while Kant's God-postulate was moral, of course (the moral law within man filled him with awe and wonder), the morality thus obtained was, again, essentially an abstract principle. This is because it was unrelated to a moral personal being, that is, the God of biblical Christianity.

The Ontological Argument

Anselm spoke of God as the being "than which nothing greater can be thought." This conception necessarily includes the idea of existence; existence is, after all, part of perfect being. Therefore, if man has this idea of a Perfect Being (g/God), then such a being exists.

Anselm's argument, however, begs the question. It is assumed that what is thought or conceived must exist in reality. But this is what is being proved, and it is not self-evident. René Descartes approached it a little differently. He said that everyone has this idea of the existence of an infinitely Perfect Being, and, since humans are finite, this idea could not have originated with them. Rather, it had to come from this Being. For Descartes, God's existence is inferred to account for this idea; for Anselm, God's existence is included in the idea.

And, it must be noted that the *idea* of the Infinite is still finite in and of itself.²⁴ In fact, this is the fundamental problem with this proof; the standard that must be used in defining and measuring the Absolute Being is finite. As Bray notes, "In the final analysis, the absolute cannot

²⁴ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 86.

be measured except by itself—a conclusion which seems to invalidate the ontological argument for God’s existence.”²⁵

Traditional Proofs: Conclusion

The rational proofs for God’s existence are inadequate for the purposes of Christian Theology.²⁶ This is true for several reasons.

First, the rational proofs rest on at least two unbiblical assumptions. The first concerns the nature of *facts*. That is, a fact is not something that is independent of interpretation, free-floating, or brute. Instead, all facts are what they are because of their place in the plan of God; only this gives facts any factuality. In this respect, one cannot begin with a so-called independent fact and reason to God. As Strong noted above, one must begin with God as a given and reason to God-given, God-interpreted facts. The rational proofs, on the other hand, begin with an autonomous creature (man) who reasons from so-called independent facts to the Christian God, in something like a rational “leap.” A second concern relates to the abilities predicated of the unaided reason of sinful humans. In short, the unbelieving man hates God and is totally prejudiced against Him. Sinful humans are incapable of reasoning objectively about God or spiritual things (Rom 8:7; Eph 4:17), as the rational proofs require.²⁷

²⁵ Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 69.

²⁶ Cf. Robert L. Reymond’s similar conclusion in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 135–52.

²⁷ In his metaphysical preconditions for doing theology, Geisler does not address these factors. But, Geisler’s optimism about unaided human reason is nothing new. Francis Turretin, for example, affirmatively answered the question, “Can the existence of God be irrefutably demonstrated against the atheists?” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Giger, ed. James Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. [reprint ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992], 1:169–77).

Second, the proofs fail to prove *Christian* theism. That is, they fail to lead to the God of the Bible, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. For instance, Geisler's proofs lead to a deity that has the qualities of indivisibility, infinity, necessity, and perfection, a deity Geisler can only assume is the God of Christian theism and not the god of polytheism, pantheism, deism, or the rest.²⁸ In fact, Paul's reasoning implies that Geisler's assumption is off the mark. For Paul says that (1) the natural man rejects the true God because of inherent depravity (Rom 1:18); (2) the god this man "accepts," then, cannot be the true God; (3) therefore, the natural man's god is an idol.

Third, and related to this, the proofs assert no more than the existence of a being who is greater than the universe. That is, one cannot infer an infinite being from any number of finite facts. There is no straight line in logic, much less in theology, between the finite and the infinite. For example, the teleological argument points to no more than a world architect, not a world creator.

Fourth, the above notwithstanding, the proofs also only lead to the *probable* existence of the true God. That is, the arguments are admittedly inconclusive, yet they are used to *confirm* the idea of God as a justifiable, rational intuition.²⁹ As J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. concedes, "Facts are observed and implications of facts are inferred, leading to more or less probability in conclusions, with more or less cogency. There is no argument known to us which, as an argument, leads to more than a probable (highly probable) conclusion."³⁰ In fact, he says in another place,

²⁸ *Systematic Theology*, 1:38-41.

²⁹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 71.

³⁰ *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 1:72.

We hold that these arguments do establish a presumption in favor of faith in the God of the Bible. It should never be held that these arguments have the demonstrative quality of mathematical processes. It ought to be recognized, on the contrary, that, as we have indicated above, all existential propositions are logically qualified by a greater or lesser degree of probability.³¹

In this respect, the proofs still require a “leap” from a probably-proved god to the definitively-existing Christian (True) God. That is, the proofs still require faith, though one based on proofs and not Scripture.

In conclusion, the evidence of order, design, purpose, and moral oughtness in the universe is intelligible only on the basis of the Scripture’s testimony. If this evidence is to be used, Scripture’s witness and perspective must be factored in. But, in that case, these proofs cease to be independently-validated and, subsequently, cease to be viable for their original purpose.³²

³¹ Ibid., 1:100.

³² Bavinck, who gives a bit higher estimation of the proofs’ value than what is found here, nevertheless helpfully concludes that the term “proofs” is, in the end, too strong, preferring rather to call them “testimonies,” which bring clarity but not certainty (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:90–91).

In light of this, the question of the use of proofs in pre-evangelism can be answered in the following way. Even the best proofs only tell man what he already knows about God from general revelation. And, at their worst, these proofs may lead man to accept an idol or something less than the true God. Further, the proofs do not technically *confirm* belief, if *confirm* implies giving assurance of the validity of something. In this respect, nothing independent of the Bible and the internal work of the Holy Spirit can viably confirm one’s belief in God’s existence.

Chapter 5

THE SELF-REVELATION OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Having denied the validity of proving God's existence via the traditional proofs, the Christian theologian is left with one alternative—*revelation*. God must disclose Himself or He will not be found. Of the various channels of God's self-disclosure (e.g., miracles, nature, etc.), there is only one with which the theologian can work in his construction of doctrine—*Scripture*. Of course, this does not preclude the other channels from actually revealing God; it simply limits the theologian to the only source in which these other channels are properly understood. In short, these other channels are not independent witnesses for theologian's task.

In Scripture the central affirmation is not that God is but that *God has spoken*. If God has spoken, then, He necessarily exists. So the testimony of the Bible can be used to prove God's existence, if need be, despite the philosophical objection that this is circular reasoning, that is, proving the God of the Bible by the Bible of God. In fact, in Christian thought, all reasoning concerning God and His relation to the universe is circular. One must reason from God to God-given facts and from there to God-interpreted facts. No alternative exists.

Further, God is not revealed in Scripture in an argumentative fashion; rather, He is revealed in a direct and immediate manner. (The same could be said of the other channels of revelation.) Revelation is, then, not a speculative endeavor. That is, it does not leave the recipient with the task

of reasoning, inferring, or deducing that there is a God. Revelation is non-discoverable by humans; it is immediate.

Not all truth, however, is revelation, though all revelation is truth. Therefore truth arrived at by human investigation is, indeed, truth, but it is not revelation. Millard Erickson notes similarly, “Genuine knowledge and genuine morality in unbelieving (as well as believing) humans are not their own accomplishments. Truth arrived at apart from special revelation is still God’s truth.”¹ In context, Erickson argues for this truth as an aspect of general revelation (a notion which is theologically suspect). Norman Geisler more explicitly affirms this connection, saying, “Most of the truths of science, history, mathematics, and the arts are not in God’s Word; the bulk of truth in all these areas is found only in God’s general revelation.”² Geisler goes on to emphasize that this truth is discoverable via human reason:

The basic laws of human reason are common to believer and unbeliever. . . . [W]ithout them, no writing, thinking, or rational inferences would be possible. But nowhere are these laws of thought spelled out in the Bible. Rather, they are part of God’s general revelation *and the special object of philosophical thought* [emphasis added].³

What is important to note is that, for Geisler, these philosophical truths of general revelation are part of the revelational preconditions for doing theology. Putting this all together, then, leads to an uncomfortable conclusion: If all extra-biblical truth is general revelation, and if

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 199.

² Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 1:70.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:71.

general revelation is the special object of philosophical thought, and if this philosophical thought is a precondition for doing theology, then philosophy is a precondition to theology and, further, general revelation makes an original contribution to systematics.

This is tenuous, however. If general revelation is to show that God exists and to demonstrate something of His moral character (leaving man inexcusably guilty for perverting this revelation, Rom 1:20), it is difficult to see how Geisler's ideas of general revelation and truth can accomplish this without a highly complex system of logical reasoning. Again, the Scriptures indicate that man's condemnation is based on his rejection of the *intuitive* knowledge of God granted to him by general revelation. If this means knowledge which is immediate, intuitive, and non-discoverable, then Geisler's truth-in-general is not revelation in the theological sense.⁴

In the following, the seven channels (listed below) of God's self-revelation will be mined for their distinctive contributions.⁵

1. **The Material and Animal Creation**
2. **The Nature and Constitution of Man**
3. **Direct Revelation**
4. **God's Mighty Acts (Miracles and Providence)**
5. **The Lives of God's People**
6. **Scripture**
7. **Jesus Christ**

⁴ It is much better, then, to understand truth in general as that which can be gleaned by the human mind through the aid of common grace. Common grace is a universal work of the Holy Spirit by which He restrains certain effects of depravity and enables people to accomplish civic or cultural good. As such it is not a precondition of nor serves as a basis for systematic theology. And, the truth thus extracted is not general revelation in the biblical/theological sense.

⁵ These seven channels, along with some of their fundamental ideas, are taken from Alva J. McClain, "The Doctrine of God" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

THE MATERIAL AND ANIMAL CREATION

It is important to remember that while this channel reveals God in a true and authoritative fashion, it relies on Scripture's commentary to be properly interpreted. Otherwise, a double-revelation theory emerges which puts nature and Scripture on an even playing field of authority, making the theologian and (more problematically) the scientist *independent* experts in their respective fields.⁶ The instability of this theory is evident when a conflict arises between an interpretation of physical science and the biblical text. The scientist's interpretation often is allowed to trump the exegesis of the theologian. Examples of this phenomenon could be easily given from the human sciences as well (e.g., psychology vis-à-vis biblical counseling).⁷

That God has plainly disclosed Himself in creation is the testimony of many biblical authors. The very opening chapter of the biblical canon (Gen 1) declares plainly that the natural order is not self-created, self-sustaining, and self-propagating. God is the Creator and all else is designed, made, sustained, and controlled by Him for His ultimate self-glory and self-satisfaction. And, being "very good" (Gen 1:31) is the superlative divine approbation and appreciation of a six-day old universe.

⁶ For a fuller discussion, see John C. Whitcomb, *The Origin of the Solar System* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964) and David W. Diehl, "Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda," *JETS* 30 (1987): 441-55. Norman Geisler reflects a double-revelation theory (*Systematic Theology*, 1:77-79). Also, see the discussion above on "Nature and Natural Theology" in chapter 1.

⁷ See Douglas Bookman, "The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling," in *An Introduction to Biblical Counseling* (Dallas: Word, 1994), pp. 93-97; also see his earlier comments on the integrationist's view, p. 69. Also note Robert L. Thomas, "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics," *TMSJ* 9 (1998): 18-22.

In this vein Job says,

But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you; and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you. Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you; and let the fish of the sea declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind? (Job 12:7–10).

In Job 38–41 God instructs His servant out of a whirlwind by demonstrating from the natural order His wisdom and power, beginning with the original creation itself. This includes and pertains to man himself. God indicates that even what is not known and cannot be known about Him from the creation is testimonial to His absolute greatness and otherness. Job is reduced to silence and repentance before God (Job 42:1–6).⁸ Russell D. Moore draws this acute observation: “The sovereignty and goodness of God in the natural order are tied, therefore, to his sovereignty and goodness in the moral order, a truth to which the righteous Job submits in faith.”⁹

David says that God’s self-disclosure in creation is (1) specific—“the work of His hands,” not that of an impersonal first cause or unmoved mover; (2) perpetual—“day to day . . . night to night”; (3) inaudible—“there is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard”; and (4) universal—“through all the earth . . . to the end of the world.” God tells Isaiah to “lift up [his] eyes on high and see who has created these stars” (40:26). Paul similarly says that “since the creation of the world His

⁸ Russell D. Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), pp. 73–74.

⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

invisible attributes . . . have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made" (Rom 1:20; cf. also Job 36:24–37:24; 38:1–39:30; Acts 14:17).

This channel is, as previously stated, limited. First, while accessible to all, it is actually received by none, due to depravity (Rom 1:18). Moore says correctly here that there is always a tension in this issue between the reality of general revelation and the limitations of it, that is, "between the clarity of God's disclosure and the distortions of it by fallen humanity."¹⁰ In truth, both ideas must be maintained for theological precision. In an important sense, all mankind knows God cognitively, but it takes a unilateral work of divine grace for God to be known salvifically.¹¹

Second, this channel is partial; it reveals nothing about God's love, mercy, and grace, not to mention any redemptive information (though Paul states at Lystra that something of God's goodness can be seen, Acts 14:17).¹² In fact, the purposes of this avenue are also limited: (1) to glorify God—Psalm 19:1; (2) to condemn human beings for inexcusably perverting the knowledge of God revealed—Romans 1:20; and (3) to build a framework for the special revelation of God—Psalm 19:7–14; Proverbs 30:4; and Acts 14:17. And, third, this channel is limited by physical evil. That is, the Edenic curse obscures the full import of this channel of revelation. Disasters, wars, diseases, and other such things,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

¹¹ Geisler holds a contrary view of the ability of the natural man to receive the revelation of God in nature. In his view, the natural man can respond positively and seek God through the light of creation. And, Geisler suggests that God responds to such by sending a special revelation about Christ and salvation—i.e., He will send the light of redemption. This light may come through different channels such as missionaries, angels, dreams, visions, and other miraculous avenues (*Systematic Theology*, 1:416, 432, 462–65).

¹² In other words, there is no gospel in the stars (contra Kenneth Kantzer, "The Communication of Revelation," in *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968], pp. 67–68; also Henry Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs* [San Diego: Creation Life, 1974], pp. 334–43).

while results of man's sin and God's subsequent curse,¹³ tarnish the brilliance of creation's display of God's glory.

Further, as noted in chapter 2, creation is part of what is known in theology as *general revelation*. And, as stated there, it is difficult to delimit what precisely this general revelation reveals (cf. the charts by Bruce Demarest and Paul Enns on pp. 41–42).¹⁴

THE NATURE AND CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN BEINGS

Each member of the human race is a revelation of God. Each person bears the image of God; that is, he replicates the infinite God on a finite level. He *is* the image of God. Both Moses (Gen 1:26) and Paul (1 Cor 11:7) state this clearly enough, not to mention less explicit references by David (Ps 139:14), Solomon (Eccl 3:11¹⁵), and another by Paul (Acts 17:28). Further, the moral tribunal (i.e., human conscience) that each human possesses is revelatory of the God who made him (Rom 2:15).

¹³ Isaiah, for instance, says that God creates (or causes) well-being as well as calamity (45:7). The Hebrew word *ra'*, translated "evil" in the KJV, does not refer to moral evil but to physical calamity or disaster.

A question often asked is whether HIV/AIDS is God's judgment on homosexuals. The answer is that it is not His judgment on that group specifically; otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the fact that others, besides homosexuals, contract this disease. (Actually, it is a cluster of diseases). HIV/AIDS is God's judgment on *society* for its sinfulness; in fact, all societies are, to some extent or another, victimized by sin. More specifically, Paul says that unnatural sex carries its "due penalty" (Rom 1:27), and this presumably includes HIV/AIDS, among other venereal diseases and much more. Sadly, this penalty carries over to those who do not participate in the unnatural.

¹⁴ See similar discussions in Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), p. 80; Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Zondervan, 1987), 1:72; and Bruce Demarest and Richard J. Harpel, "Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies' and the Biblical Idea of Revelation," *BSac* 146 (1989): 336.

¹⁵ God has set "eternity" (*'olam*) in man's heart (so KJV, NASB, NIV, and NLT). NET has "ignorance" in the text but discusses the main views of *'olam* in the notation.

The image of God in man is that which causes man to resemble his Maker and which separates him from animals. This image consists chiefly in man's being a personal, rational, and moral being, as well as a spiritual being (possessing the capacity for worshipping God and for eternal, conscious existence, et al.).

Like the former channel, this channel too has its limitations. First, it also is partial. Man is finite in every area of his being, meaning that God, as an infinite being, is at best only partly revealed in such a finite creature. Second, it is affected by sin. Man lost his holiness in the Fall; therefore, his display of God's perfect holiness is subsequently obscured.¹⁶

DIRECT REVELATION

The Old Testament portrays God's speaking to man on scores of occasions (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Hagar, Moses, the Prophets, et al.), often in an audible voice. This primitive and direct revelation would be accessible to (1) those spoken to; (2) those who read the inspired record (especially after Moses, although there was writing before him, though none of which was inspired Scripture); and (3) those who received the oral tradition as it came down the generations.

Not surprisingly this channel also has its limits. First, it is partial. No one received the total revelation of God directly. After all, God spoke through the prophets to the Jewish fathers "in many portions" (Heb 1:1). Second, the oral tradition of direct revelation became corrupted (e.g., the

¹⁶ A related question is whether man *lost* the image of God when he sinned. The answer is no; while the image of God was marred, it was not obliterated in the Fall. It was effaced, but it was not erased (cf. Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9).

polytheistic Babylonian Creation [Enuma Elish] and Flood [Gilgamesh Epic] epics). Third, the direct revelation was not available to all since God did not speak directly to all people.

Many today profess to have some kind of a direct mystical connection with God by which they receive divine oracles. Others of an overly pietistic nature likewise give the impression that their Christian walk includes direct revelation (e.g., the remark “God spoke to me” is often repeated). However, God is not giving direct revelation today. He only speaks through His Word—the completed canon of Scripture—as understood correctly by means of grammatical-historical-theological interpretation.¹⁷

While extensive arguments for a closed canon for this age are too lengthy to be explicated here, it can, at the least, be said that the believer is to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). This test has specific reference to aberrant Christology, and the criterion for such a test is the biblical data concerning both the complete and genuine deity and humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. But, the apostle’s injunction may be justifiably applied in other settings where one must discern what information is from God and what is not. Again, the standard for guidance is the teaching of Scripture; any other source for divine instruction is perilous.

The apostle Paul indicated that revelatory activity would eventually be done away (1 Cor 13:8). When this would take place is debatable, but the text indicates that speaking in tongues (and by implication all revelatory gifts) is considered an aspect of the “partial” and “childish”

¹⁷ Again, as stated in chapter 1, to bypass one’s intellect in approaching the Bible (whether to find God’s will or something else) is to lapse into mysticism or pietistic emotionalism, neither of which represents a high level of Christian maturity.

stage that would be done away with the coming of “the completed thing” (*to teleion*), adulthood, or knowing fully (1 Cor 13:9–12). This strongly suggests the cessation of revelatory activity with the coming of the completed New Testament canon for the church age.¹⁸ To circumvent this absolute authority in favor of some form of direct revelation is to abandon stability in the Christian experience.

GOD’S MIGHTY ACTS OF MIRACLE AND PROVIDENCE

God’s mighty acts refers to His works of miracle and providence. A miracle is a direct and immediate imposition of God’s power into the time-space-mass continuum. A work of providence is God’s mediate employment of His power, His indirect intervention into this natural order through secondary causation.¹⁹ In either case there is a self-disclosure of God’s being and will. For example, God’s miraculous deeds in Egypt were, in effect, His response to Pharaoh’s question: “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” (Exod 5:2). The plague-miracles plainly revealed who Yahweh was and why Pharaoh should obey His word (Exod 7:5, 17; 9:14; 10:2). In another place God complained that Israel had spurned Him despite all the miracles

¹⁸ There will be new revelation and revived revelatory vehicles in the eschatological Tribulation period and kingdom age (Rev 11:3–7; Joel 2:28–29). Also for an excellent exegetical and theological discussion of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, see R. Bruce Compton, “1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts,” *DBSJ* 9 (2004): 97–144.

¹⁹ A. H. Strong defines a miracle as an event caused by the immediate agency of God that does not contravene natural law. This definition is a little too naturalistic and, perhaps, even somewhat contradictory. That is, the question is unanswered whether a miracle is supernatural or natural, or a confluent synergism between the two (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907], pp. 117–20).

He had given to reveal Himself (Num 14:11). Further, the Lord dried up the Jordan (at flood-stage, no less) so that “all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty” (Josh 2:24). As for providential revelation, one clear example is God’s control of the actions and intentions of Cyrus to repatriate Israel, to the end “that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other” (Isa 45:6). The calamities of the Babylonian siege and captivity were to teach Judah that Yahweh was the true God (Ezek 11:9–10). Another is God’s witness to Himself to all nations through the provision of rain and fruitful seasons (Acts 14:17; cf. also John 10:38; 1 Cor 10:7–11).

God’s revelation of His acts was accessible to those who saw them, read about them in Scripture, or heard about them in oral tradition. Miriam reported that after the great Exodus from Egypt “the peoples have heard, they tremble” at the miraculous power (Exod 15:14). Some forty years later, Rahab testified that when news of the Exodus, as well as that of the more recent east-Jordan conquest, had reached her people: “Our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh 2:11). In fact, nearly six hundred years later, the Philistines could still recall the revelation of God in the Egyptian plagues (1 Sam 4:7–8).

This channel, however, is also not without limits. First, it too is partial. God’s works do not reveal as much about Him as one might expect. Though miracles were one of the most spectacular channels, they were also one of the most inefficient at revealing God. Second, as with direct revelation, the oral tradition retelling God’s mighty acts became distorted. Third, this channel is also easily misinterpreted. Again, every

miracle and revelatory act of providence needed an infallible interpreter with a divinely-authoritative interpretation. Otherwise, the meaning of the mighty act was lost (cf. John 12:26; Acts 14:11). The principle of Old Testament prophetism is helpful here: "Surely the Lord does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7; Isa 46:9–10). In other words, the prophets were divine interpreters of God's acts. Further, other acts required divine commentary (e.g., the Flood, Gen 6:12; the rainbow following the Flood, Gen 9:12–17; the parting of the Red Sea, Exod 14:21; Sennacherib's divinely-caused loss, 2 Kgs 19:35–36). Perhaps the chief example of this is the cross, which itself required apostolic commentary.²⁰

THE LIVES OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Believers are revelatory of God. They are the "light of the world" (Matt 5:13–15). Paul counted the Corinthians believers as "our letter . . . known and read by all men; . . . you are a letter of Christ" (2 Cor 3:2–3). Christians have the gospel treasure in earthen vessels, "carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Cor 4:10; cf. Phil 1:20). Believers have put on the new self who is continuously being renewed; therefore, they should

²⁰ A related question here is whether God performs any miraculous works today? If by miracle is meant a public, spectacular, and undeniable (Acts 4:16) act or, as C. Samuel Storms says, "a direct act of God independent of the otherwise natural order of cause and effect" (*Reaching God's Ear* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988], p. 272), then "no." God is not working that way today. Now, if regeneration qualifies as a biblical miracle, then it alone presently (and regularly) evidences God's miraculous power. Further, if God does work a physical miracle today, it is so heavily surrounded by providence that it would be impossible to certainly detect, especially since no one today is receiving direct revelation (since the canon is closed) to infallibly interpret the alleged miracle (see John C. Whitcomb, *Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1973] and B. B. Warfield, *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, Real and Counterfeit* [London: Banner of Truth, 1972]).

not lie to one another (Col 3:9–10). Christians are a chosen race and have other exalted spiritual positions so as to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). In short, when people observe believers there is a revelation of what God is like in His personality, love, mercy, compassion, justice, and other moral and benevolent characteristics.

With this channel, serious limitations exist because the best of believers is still sinful; thus, the revelation is marred and obscured. Therefore, to the extent that believers misrepresent God, the revelation is flawed. In some cases a revelation of God is virtually blotted out completely because of willful or perhaps heinous sin.

THE BIBLE

As noted earlier, the Bible is a proof for God’s existence, and it reveals God. In the former case, if God has spoken (in the Bible), then He exists. For instance, God spoke to Israel in the Old Testament times through the prophets (Heb 1:1, which speaks of the literary prophets). In the latter, God’s self-revealing gospel was “promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2). Further, on the Emmaus road after His resurrection, Jesus “beg[an] with Moses and with all the prophets . . . [and] explained to [the two] the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27; cf. vv. 44–45). In fact, Jesus asserted that the Scriptures testified to Himself as the Son of God (John 5:39).

Not everything about God is revealed in the Bible. However, all that is necessary to know of God for salvation and the Christian life is plainly given (2 Tim 3:15, Scripture is able to give one “the wisdom that leads to

salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"). But, there are myriads of other facts in many fields and areas of life that are given in perfect and inerrant form.

While the Word of God in itself is infinite and limitless, there are, however, some limitations in the complete revelatory process of the Bible. First, there is the limitation of human language. Human language is finite, and while it is an adequate revelatory vehicle, it does have certain obvious limitations in revealing the *infinite* God. Second, there are the limits of translation. It is extremely difficult to convey all of the meaning of the original biblical manuscripts through different languages. Something is always lost in translation. Included in this is the whole problem of textual criticism with its difficult task of determining the original words of the autographs. Third, there is the limitation of human illiteracy. After all, one must be able to read before the message of God in the written word can be discerned. Coupled with this is the fact that there are still some two thousand tribes or dialects that do not have the Scriptures.

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ is also a revelation of the only true and living God. One of His names—*Emmanuel* (or, *Immanuel*, "God with us")—depicts Him as such a revelatory vehicle. Jesus claims to be in some sense an exclusive revelation of the Father: "Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt 11:27). The apostle John, in the prologue to his gospel, says: "The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (John

1:18). Christ declared that to see Him is to see the One who sent Him (i.e., God the Father, John 12:45). He also tells Philip, quite frankly, that to have seen Him is to have seen the Father (John 14:8–9). Paul, speaking in more theological language, is also quite definitive: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). And the author of Hebrews says of Christ that He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s nature (Heb 1:2).

In Christ there is a one-for-one revelation of God; Jesus is an extension of the divine essence. This revelation is complete, total, and perfect; all the fullness of Deity is in Him. He is the “exact representation” of God (Heb 1:3). As Homer Kent, Jr. says: “As the imprint of the die perfectly represents the original design, so in Christ there is the display for those who have eyes to see of God’s very essence.”²¹ Christ is “the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), the *eikon* having the same theological meaning as *charakter* (“exact representation”) in Hebrews 1:3. The revelation of God in Christ is also final. This is the implication of John 14:9: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” It is also the assertion of Hebrews 1:1–2. The Son of God is God’s final word to man after He had revealed Himself in many parts and in many ways before. Jesus is God’s last word in the “last days,” that is, the times of the Messiah which began in the 1st century A.D.

God could not have revealed Himself more fully than in Jesus. He could not have become the other forms of revelation. *They are not extensions of the divine essence and do not possess a divine nature as Jesus does.* Comparing the other channels to Jesus, one cannot say: (1) regarding creation—he that has seen a petunia or a snowflake has seen the Father; (2) regarding

²¹ *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 37.

the nature and constitution of man—he that has seen another human being has seen the Father; (3) regarding direct revelation—he that has heard direct revelation from God has seen the Father; (4) regarding the mighty acts—he that has seen the parting of the Red Sea has seen the Father; (5) regarding the lives of Christians—he that has seen a Christian has seen the Father; and (6) regarding the Bible—he that has seen a Bible has seen the Father.

A related question one may ask is whether Old Testament Christophanies were extensions of the divine essence. It appears they were. That is, they were pre-incarnate (temporary) appearances of Jesus Christ. So while they were not real incarnations, they were, nevertheless, genuine appearances of *God*. Further, one may ask whether the theophanies (e.g., the pillars of cloud and fire) were extensions of the divine essence. These appear not to have been (excluding, of course, the Christophanies from this category). That is, one could say, he that has seen the Angel of the Lord (i.e., a Christophany) has seen God (Judg 13:22); however, one could not say, he who has seen the burning bush or pillars of cloud and fire has seen God. In other words, theophanies did not have a divine nature and were not extensions of the divine essence, while Christophanies certainly did and were. After all, the Angel was deity, even though He did not have a genuine *human* nature in these appearances.

Further, the only limitation on this channel is the finiteness of the human mind. God is still the infinite, incomprehensible God, even when revealed in Jesus Christ. In fact, the gospel writers note that there was much more about God's revelation in Christ than could be contained in Scripture. John says, for instance, that Jesus performed "many other signs . . . in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this

book.” John admits that he chose only eight signs, from among this large body of revelation, for his purpose of showing that “Jesus is the Christ the Son of God” (John 20:30–31). John notes a little later that the world itself could not contain all the books that could be written concerning the things Jesus did (John 21:25). One can only imagine the amount of revelation of God in Christ that God saw fit not to record.

Finally, in the absence of Jesus Christ, the Bible is the highest form of God’s self-revelation. In Scripture one can read about all the other channels as well as know what exactly each reveals. The written Word of God gives the original revelation in its infallible and pure form. Furthermore, the Scriptures today give the only authentic and authoritative disclosure of Jesus Christ. For instance, very little concerning Jesus of Nazareth is found in contemporary, 1st century literature. In fact, there is virtually nothing whatever of theological or practical help. No authentic books or accounts of the life of Christ have survived except the gospels (the New Testament apocryphal gospels and similar writings, which have been providentially kept out of the sacred canon, notwithstanding).

Chapter 6

THE PERSONALITY OF GOD

THE MEANING OF PERSONALITY

One of the most important truths about God is that He is personal. Not surprisingly, however, theologians differ over what *personality* means.¹ Sometimes personality is described by the three qualities of intellect, emotion, and will. At other times, only two qualities are indicated: self-consciousness (i.e., the ability to make oneself the object of one's own thoughts) and self-determination (i.e., determination or will that arises from within). Variations of these exist. For example E. Y. Mullins suggests that personality means "one who is intelligent, self-conscious, self-determining, and moral."² Millard Erickson says that God's personality means that "He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings."³ Alva J. McClain, however, gives the most preferable (and extensive) definition, saying: "Personality is a name given to the nucleus of a definite group of functions or characteristics." He continues, explaining further that "personality is living, intelligent, purposive, active, free, self-conscious, emotional *spirit*."⁴ This definition will be followed in the discussion below of God's personality.

¹ See A. H. Strong, who lists several definitions (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907], p. 253).

² *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Development* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1917), p. 217.

³ *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 295.

⁴ Alva J. McClain, "The Doctrine of God" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

Finally, it is impossible to make a clear dichotomy between attributes and personality. God is both personal and absolute (i.e., He is self-contained in every attribute, and His attributes and His person are correlative). In other words, God *is* what His attributes are. The attributes are not simple abstractions but are what characterize Him as a *person*. And His personality is not abstract and free from His attributes but is, rather, characterized by them.⁵

THE COMPONENTS OF PERSONALITY

Spirituality

Spirituality is considered by some theologians to be a divine attribute, something which belongs to the divine essence itself, rather than a component of personality. Erickson, for instance, makes spirit an attribute of God's greatness.⁶ Louis Berkhof understands God's spirituality as one of His communicable attributes, one of those which belong to God as a personal Spirit (along with the moral and intellectual attributes and those attributes of sovereignty).⁷ These both reinforce the fact that the line between attributes and personality is thin.

What is clear, however, is that God is indeed a *spiritual* being. Jesus affirms, for instance, that "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). Jesus is here simply reflecting the theology of the second commandment, which testifies to

⁵ See John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p. 602.

⁶ *Christian Theology*, p. 289. See also J. Carl Laney, Jr., "God," in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 180.

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 65–66.

the spirituality of God when it says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Exod 20:4; cf. Deut 4:12, 15; Rom 1:23). In short, this is itself a commandment to worship God spiritually because God is Spirit. He is, in sum, the infinite and perfect Spirit, and He is to be apprehended and worshipped spiritually.

Two ideas are comprised in the fact of God’s spirituality. First, there is the idea that God is personal. That is, the functions, characteristics, or attributes of personality arise out of spirit. Spirit is, in this sense, the metaphysical source of personality but not necessarily a synonym for personality.⁸ Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, in their section on God’s spirituality, agree, suggesting that “‘God is Spirit’ means that God is one indivisible, *personal* [emphasis added], living, and active being.”⁹ Herman Hoeksema also connects the two, summarily saying, God (who is spirit) “is absolute, self-existent Personality. Everywhere in Scripture he meets us as *the Ego*, in whom consciousness and self-consciousness are absolutely one and identical.”¹⁰ Erickson, however, demurs, contending that spirituality does not imply personality because Aristotle, Hinduism, and others suggest reality is one great, thinking mind or some other kind of *impersonal* spirit.¹¹ Erickson’s observation notwithstanding, this idea of *impersonal* Spirit is foreign to *biblical* thought, for in Scripture, a

⁸ This counteracts the purely materialistic view of personality which suggests that it arises out of the brain, though, it must be admitted, there is an undeniable and necessary connection between the two. God is the very essence of personality because He is pure spirit (John 4:24; cf. Heb 12:9).

⁹ *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:197.

¹⁰ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), p. 59.

¹¹ *Christian Theology*, p. 295.

spiritual being is, by definition, personal.¹² In sum, there is no such thing as an impersonal spirit in theology.

Finally, because of God's personality, one can have fellowship and communion with Him. Because of His tri-personality, one can be not only in fellowship and communion with God but can also be indwelt by Him through the Holy Spirit. Christianity is the only religion that puts a worshipper in personal touch with its Founder and causes him to be *personally* indwelt by the Founder.

A second idea that God's spirituality comprises is His incorporeality and invisibility. In essence, spirit has no necessary connection with matter; it has neither physical nature nor aspect. God is, therefore, neither material nor reliant upon such. As Strong notes, "Spirit . . . is an immaterial substance, invisible, uncompounded, indestructible."¹³ And, since spirit in itself has no body or bodily parts, so neither does God.

Again, the prohibition of the second commandment shows God as an incorporeal spirit (Exod 20:4; 34:17) who is lawfully worshipped *only* spiritually (cf. John 4:24). Further, Moses clearly recounts that when Israel heard God's voice at Sinai, they saw no form because God is invisible (Deut 4:12). Paul speaks similarly in Colossians when he speaks of Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (1:15) and in 1 Timothy when he prays to "the King . . . invisible, the only God" (1:17).

In sum, God is of an essence which makes Him a being all His own, distinct from the universe. He is immaterial, invisible, and without composition or extension.¹⁴ As matter has properties that manifest

¹² For example, Scripture speaks of spirits perceiving (Mark 2:8), purposing (Acts 19:21), rejoicing (Luke 1:47), and worshipping (John 4:23)—all activities of *personal* beings.

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, p. 249.

¹⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 66

themselves directly to the bodily senses, Spirit has properties that manifest itself directly to the self-consciousness.¹⁵

There are a few questions, however, raised by such a discussion. First, how are texts explained which depict various people as having seen God? For example, Moses (and a few others) “saw the God of Israel. . . . They saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exod 24:10–11). In fact, Moses describes God as speaking “with [him] face to face just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:11). Isaiah describes a similar situation in which he “saw the Lord sitting on a throne” (Isa 6:1).

These are best understood as *theophanies* (i.e., appearances of God). God was not seen as an invisible Spirit but in a visible form in which He chose to be manifested, though the particular manifestation, as such, did not have a divine nature. At other times, Scripture recounts that God chose to manifest Himself as a dove (John 1:32) and a burning bush (Exod 3:2–6). Further, when God chose to manifest Himself in a human person, it was always the pre-incarnate Christ. And, since the incarnation, God has chosen to manifest Himself permanently in Jesus Christ. That is, to see Jesus is to see God (John 14:9; Acts 7:56).

Second, if God is an invisible Spirit, how can He have hands, feet, eyes, and ears as numerous texts indicate? These are best understood as *anthropomorphism*, which is, as described in chapter 2, the metaphorical attribution of bodily parts to God. These expressions are rhetorical aids for the common people for whom the Bible was written. That is, Scripture was not written primarily for the philosopher and his philosophical inquiries. Most people cannot think of a purely spiritual person without some kind of bodily extension. As such, anthropomorphism is exceedingly

¹⁵ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 140.

helpful, allowing the finite mind to understand the infinite and spiritual God. In fact, it was the incarnation which was the final installment of anthropomorphism (and theophanies, as well). God revealed Himself completely, perfectly, and finally in terms of a physical body. The incarnation was in the physical form from which the human body is patterned;¹⁶ it is not some form of Platonic formulaic abstraction.

Life

On numerous occasions Scripture calls God the *living* God. For instance, the Israelites ask, "Who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the *living* God?" (Deut 5:26). Jeremiah writes, "The Lord is the true God; He is the *living* God and the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10). Paul speaks of the Thessalonians who gave evidence of their conversion in that they had "turned from idols to serve a *living* and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). Paul says on another occasion that believers fix their "hope on the *living* God" (1 Tim 4:10; cf. Josh 3:10; Ps 42:2; Matt 16:16; and 2 Cor 6:16). Another way Scripture speaks of this is with the Old Testament phrase "as the Lord lives," which is a form of an oath (1 Kgs 17:1; 2 Kgs 2:2, 4, 6; et al.), in fact, an oath God sometimes imposed on Himself (e.g., "'As I live,' declares the Lord," Isa 49:18; Jer 22:24; et al.).

This *life* spoken of here refers in its theological sense to potential energy or activity directed by its own intelligence. In other words, God is able to do things external to Himself, while the non-living are unable to *do* anything.¹⁷ Further, internally, God is active in Himself. That is,

¹⁶ John Gill, *Body of Divinity* (reprint ed., Atlanta: Turner Lasseter, 1965), p. 32.

¹⁷ As McClain says, life "means that [God] is able to do things, things which the non-personal cannot do" ("The Doctrine of God").

this life speaks of God's self-sufficient, self-referring, self-affirming, self-maintaining energy out of which He is able to do things external to Himself.¹⁸

Theologians differ in their descriptions of this life. For instance, Both Heinrich Heppe and Strong connect life to mental activity, speaking of it as the energy of the mind.¹⁹ Gerald Bray, on the other hand, notes the difference in the Greek words *dunamis* and *energeia* and suggests that God's life is not only potential (*dunamis*) but also active (*energeia*) in Himself, independent from His creative activity or anything external to Himself. Thus, His creative acts spring from His own intrinsic or pure action, from His own self-sufficient energy.²⁰ Robert D. Culver speaks simply of life as self-movement, which, he suggests, indicates such life.²¹ John Gill speaks similarly, calling "life . . . a principle in the creature by which it moves itself. . . . It is self-motion only that shows a creature to be alive."²²

Finally, as the distinctly *living* God, God is able to (1) impart life to others (Gen 2:7); (2) speak (Deut 5:26); (3) create and preserve the universe (Jer 10:10–13); (4) deliver His people (Dan 6:26–27); (5) work miracles (Josh 3:10–17); (6) save men from sin (1 Tim 4:10); (7) impart life to others (Gen 2:7); and (8) judge and punish sinners (Heb 10:30–31).

¹⁸ This is in contrast, say, to dynamite which certainly has potential energy, but its power is not directed by its own intelligence; its existence cannot be described as a living existence nor can it be said to have personality.

¹⁹ Cf. respectively *Reformed Dogmatics* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 68 and *Systematic Theology*, p. 252. Strong also defines God's life as "having in his own being a source of being and activity, both for himself and others" (ibid.). Strong's point seems to reflect both David's statement that "with [God] is the fountain of life" (Ps 36:9) and Paul's that "in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28). Mullins similarly says that "the life of God is his activity of thought, feeling, and will" (*The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 219).

²⁰ *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 59ff.

²¹ *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005), p. 72.

²² *Body of Divinity* (reprint ed., Atlanta: Turner Lasseter, 1965), p. 32. He later says that "the life of God is of himself" (p. 51).

Intelligence

Some theologians put this aspect of God's personality under the attribute of God's omnisapience (God's all-wisdom). While intelligence encompasses wisdom, it seems to be broader. Intelligence may be thought to be comprised of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, as Scripture suggests. For instance, the sons of Issachar are described as "men who *understood* the times, with *knowledge* of what Israel *should do*" (1 Chron 12:32). Hannah, in her prayer of prophetic utterance, declares, "For the Lord is a God of *knowledge*" (1 Sam 2:2). Isaiah describes the Spirit of the Lord as a Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge (Isa 11:2). Proverbs says that "the Lord by *wisdom* founded the earth, by *understanding* He established the heavens. By His *knowledge* the deeps were broken up and the skies drip with dew" (3:19). Paul, after teaching on the sovereignty of God in Israel's election and the responsibility of man in Israel's disobedience, exclaims, "O, the depth of the riches both of the *wisdom* and *knowledge* of God" (Rom 11:36).

As used here, knowledge is the perception of facts, understanding is insight into the meaning of the facts perceived (correlation), and wisdom is the ability to put the facts together for good ends.²³ God in His personality possesses these things to an infinite degree.

²³ McClain, "The Doctrine of God."

Purpose

McClain notes that “purpose is reacting to a future goal, which actually exists only in the mind, as if the goal were already present.”²⁴ A good example of God’s purpose is the way He reckons and treats believers. He calls them saints, which is His goal, on the basis of the yet future, completed work. In fact, purpose is the basis of all positional truth in theology. What is more, God is perfect personality in terms of purpose. That is, He alone always acts in light of His eternal goals (Eph 1:11; 3:11), goals which He set by Himself (His decree) and for His own self-glory. Importantly, God’s purposes cannot be frustrated, as Isaiah says, “For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it” (14:27).

Action

God’s activity means not only that He is able to do all things external to Himself by His own intelligence but also that He actually does them. In other words, as the Living God, He is able to do things external to Himself, and, as the active God, He does them. Comprehended in this are all the works of God in creation, miracles, preservation, providence, and salvation. This is what some theologians call “applied energy.” God acts from His internal, self-sufficient energy, and, thus, His acts do not add to Him or fulfill some need or inner potential. God does not need nor depend on anything external to Himself for anything, including His own activity outside Himself.

²⁴ Ibid.

The biblical writers constantly refer to God's activity. For instance, the psalmist exclaims, "For You, O Lord, have made me glad by what You have done, I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands. How great are Your works, O Lord" (Ps 92:4–5). Moses reminds Israel on the plains of Moab, at the end of their wilderness sojourn, that their "own eyes have seen all the great work of the Lord which He did" (Deut 11:7). Jesus testifies to God's activity, especially in the realms of preservation and providence, saying, "My Father is working until now" (John 5:17). One of God's greatest works is His sanctification and preservation of the believer, which results in the believer's perseverance in the Christian experience. As Paul says, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:12–13).

Freedom

Freedom means that God is wholly self-determined. He is not bound by anything outside of Himself. He is independent of all that He created. God is only self-limited by His own will and nature, which implies that while free, there are things which God cannot do. As Lewis and Demarest note, "Although free to be himself, he cannot deny himself."²⁵ They go on to say that "the essence of freedom is the power to determine one's self apart from external compulsion according to one's own nature and purposes."²⁶ Freedom also carries the idea of *rational spontaneity*, which is the ability to make decisions on the basis of one's reason.

²⁵ Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:237.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Scripture attests to God's freedom, saying, for instance in Job, that God "is unique . . . who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does" (23:13). King Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way (suffering seven years of dementia) that God "does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done'" (Dan 4:35). Paul similarly notes that God does "all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11; cf. also Job 42:2; Pss 33:11; 115:3; 135:5–7; Isa 46:9–10).

There is, of course, a vast difference between the freedom of God and that of man and of animals. An animal's freedom is totally behavioristic, governed by its divinely pre-programmed instincts. Man's freedom, while greater than animals, is still different from God's. Man's freedom is controlled by his nature, but it is also controlled somewhat by his environment, something which is not true of God's. This is to be expected, though, since nothing exists in man as it exists in God.

Finally, God's freedom contrasts with fatalism, pantheism, and neo-orthodoxy. Fatalism holds that things happen by chance or are determined by fate. Pantheism says that God is locked into this world. And, neo-orthodoxy says that God's freedom is absolute, in the sense that He can turn into the opposite of Himself or that He can change His decree of election into reprobation. The neo-orthodox suggest that if God cannot do these things, then He is not truly free. However, self-determination does not demand the possibility of self-destruction. Furthermore, God's immutability, addressed below, precludes the kind of change neo-orthodoxy envisions.

Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness is the ability to objectify self. That is, it is the ability to make oneself the object of one's own thought, a definition to which W. G. T. Shedd helpfully adds, "and knowing [one] has done so."²⁷ Consciousness, as such, is simply the ability to objectify something other than oneself. In fact, even animals do this to some extent. However, only *self*-consciousness can say, "I am," and at the same time know what it is *not*. So, while animals may be able to objectify something other than themselves, they cannot make *themselves* the objects of their own thoughts (e.g., "I am a cat and *not* a dog"). Man, however, is *self*-conscious, but his self-consciousness is incomplete (cf. Pss 19:2; 139:23–24). God is, therefore, the only personality with exhaustive self-knowledge. Herman Bavinck even suggests that the assertion that "God is Light" (1 John 1:5) implies perfect self-consciousness.²⁸

Scripture underscores God's self-consciousness, recording God's own words to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod 3:14). Scripture speaks, as well, of the Spirit's self-consciousness, noting that He knows the mind of God exhaustively because He is God (1 Cor 2:10b). The Son is also described this way, albeit somewhat indirectly (John 6:6, "[Jesus] Himself knew what He was intending to do").

²⁷ *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), p. 169; see also p. 182.

²⁸ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–), 2:191.

Emotion

There is genuine emotion in God. And, as with the other personal qualities described here, emotion too arises out of spirit. Not all expressions of emotion in God are anthropopathic (attributing human emotions to God), although some are (e.g., laughter, Ps 2:4; fear, Exod 13:17, Deut 32:27). True emotion, even in human beings, emanates from a non-physical source, namely, from the spirit. Evolutionists suggest, of course, that emotions evolved along with the mind. Some even suggest that emotions are wholly glandular, simply a mechanism of the reflexes. However, these ideas are patently unbiblical. Emotions, while certainly connected to physical processes (e.g., bodily organs and chemistry), are nevertheless aspects of the immaterial. And this is all the more so with God who is a pure, incorporeal Spirit.

The biblical descriptions of God's emotions practically run the gamut of human emotions.²⁹ For example, one reads of God's everlasting, electing love for Israel (Jer 31:3), His compassion on Zion (Ps 103:13), His anger at sin (Exod 4:14; Deut 4:25; Rev 14:10), and even His hatred of sinners (Ps 5:5).³⁰

²⁹ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 166. He suggests that all of God's emotions can be fundamentally reduced to two primary emotions, love and anger. All others, he says, emanate from these.

³⁰ The Psalmist declares, "You hate all who do iniquity." This may indicate God's will to punish sinners as an act of punitive justice (cf. Mal 1:2 where *bate* is synonymous with *rejection*, the opposite of *loving* [*choosing*]).

Chapter 7

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

THE DEFINITION OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

A. H. Strong defines God's attributes as "those distinguishing characteristics of the divine nature which are inseparable from the idea of God and which constitute the basis and ground for his various manifestations to his creatures."¹ In short, these attributes are the qualities which are inherent in and manifestations of the being or essence of God. They are sometimes called the "perfections" or the "excellencies" of God, without which He would cease to be God. In this sense, they are essential qualities of God and cannot be separated from His essence.² Essence refers to His nature, comprised of those spiritual qualities that make God the divine being that He is (i.e., His deity: Col 2:9, "Godhead [*theotetos*]" [KJV]). And, it is this being, this deity, that all the members of the Godhead have in common.

Further, while God is knowable only through His attributes, the attributes are not merely human perceptions; they are not simply

¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 244.

² Millard Erickson makes a distinction between "properties" and "attributes." Properties, he says, belong to the individual persons of the Godhead and include their functions and activities. Attributes, on the other hand, are permanent qualities of the entire Godhead, constituting God what He is, His essence (*Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], pp. 291–92). John Miley makes a similar distinction, distinguishing God's attributes from His relational predicates, such as God as Creator and preserver (*Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. [reprint ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989], 1:159). These differences, while potentially having limited value, do seem to border on being overly fine theological distinctions.

humanity's way of conceiving of God or the way humanity structures its idea of God. Rather, the essence of God, His deity, is *revealed* in the attributes. These attributes (i.e., perfections) belong to God and are perceived by, not products of, the human intellect.

The attributes are not separate existences of God, nor are they separate parts of a composite God. That is to say, God is not a construct of more basic building blocks than His essence. It would be incorrect, then, to say God is a collection of attributes. To the contrary, God's existence is said to possess *simplicity*. That is, He is not susceptible of division in any sense of the word. As Herman Hoeksema says, God's simplicity means that God is One and cannot be divided (Gal 2:20); He is not "composed."³ While God's essence comprises the quality of simplicity, this does not, as John Frame notes, "rule out all multiplicity."⁴ God is still a complex being; He has a multiplicity of attributes in His indivisible being.

Also, while the attributes are not separate existences, neither are they simply super-added to His essence. The whole essence of God is in each attribute and each attribute inheres in the essence. In other words, God is not essence *and* attributes, but He is rather essence *in* attributes.⁵ This means that God *is* what the attributes are; He does not just *have* what they are. For example, He *is* knowledge, will, love, and all the rest. The attributes cannot be separated from the essence ontologically, only theoretically.

³ *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), pp. 72–73. For further discussion of God's simplicity, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–1983), 5:127–40 and Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) pp. 151–52. For an alternative view, see Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 85–97. Nash rejects the concept of God's simplicity.

⁴ *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p. 227.

⁵ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), p. 274.

Finally, since the divine essence is simple (or indivisible) and since the *whole essence* is in each of the attributes, this means, as Frame notes, that “everything in God is inseparable from everything else. His attributes have divine attributes.”⁶ Again, “None of the attributes exists without the others. So each attribute has divine attributes; each one is qualified by the others.”⁷ In other words, God is *wholly* loving and merciful; that is, He is not simply loving in one part of His being and merciful in another. This also means that God’s love is eternal and holy and that His eternity is that of a loving and wise being.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

While some theologians have denied that the perfections can be classified,⁸ most have sought for some kind of a suitable paradigm to understand them. Following are eight such classifications, many of which overlap in various ways.

⁶ *The Doctrine of God*, p. 219.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁸ For example, Hoeksema says the attributes cannot be classified, chiefly because of God’s simplicity. Using the communicable-incommunicable classification, Hoeksema notes that all of God’s virtues are at once incommunicable and communicable. He prefers, then, to treat the attributes of God in terms of the revelation of God in His names (*Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 65ff.).

Absolute and Relative (or Immanent and Transitive) Attributes

The absolute/immanent attributes are those which belong to God's inner being—His relations with Himself. They belong to His nature, independently of external action (i.e., creation). The relative/transitive attributes are the outward revelations of God's being. They are involved in His relations with the universe.⁹

The Incommunicable and Communicable Attributes

The incommunicable attributes are those related to God as the Absolute Being, the Self-sufficient One. These belong to God exclusively, admit of no degrees, and have nothing resembling them in creation. They also deal with God's transcendent greatness. On the other hand, the communicable attributes are those related to God's dealings with creation. These may be possessed in a finite way by both men and angels. They also relate to God's immanence with reference to creatures.¹⁰

Natural and Moral (or Non-Moral and Moral) Attributes

The natural/non-moral attributes are those that do not involve moral qualities. They belong to the understanding of God and to His power as

⁹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 247ff.

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 57ff.; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 275.

spirit. The moral attributes are those that involve moral qualities or are connected with the divine will.¹¹

Constitutive and Characterizing Attributes

The constitutive attributes are those which constitute God what He is. The characterizing attributes are those which characterize what He does.¹²

Multiple Categories

Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest¹³

- ◆ *Metaphysical*: God is self-existent, eternal, and unchanging.
- ◆ *Intellectual*: God is omniscient, faithful, and wise.
- ◆ *Ethical*: God is holy, just, merciful, and loving.
- ◆ *Emotional*: God detests evil and is longsuffering and compassionate.
- ◆ *Volitional*: God is free, authentic, and omnipotent.
- ◆ *Relational*: God is immanent universally in providential activity and is with His people in redemptive activity.

¹¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1917), pp. 223, 229. H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 80, 83.

¹² Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), 1:191.

¹³ *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:198ff.

Wayne Grudem¹⁴

- ◆ *Being, Mental, Moral, and Purpose*
- ◆ *Four Summary Attributes:* Perfection, Blessedness, Beauty, and Glory

Morton Smith¹⁵

- ◆ *Essential Attributes:* Spirituality (incorporeality, invisibility, immortality, simplicity, and self-consciousness), Immutability, Infinity (eternity, immensity, and omnipresence)
- ◆ *Intellectual Attributes:* Omniscience, Wisdom, and Freedom
- ◆ *Moral Attributes:* Holiness and Righteousness
- ◆ *Emotional Attributes:* Love, Grace, Longsuffering, and Wrath

John Frame¹⁶

- ◆ *Triad of Control, Authority, and Presence*
- ◆ *Attribute Groups of Goodness, Knowledge, and Power* (which are then oriented to this triad)

Attributes of Greatness and Goodness

This is really a modification of the moral/non-moral (or natural/moral) classification and will be followed here, as arranged by Alva J. McClain.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 185–86, 218–20.

¹⁵ *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 1:130–46.

¹⁶ *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 398–99.

¹⁷ “The Doctrine of God” (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN). Erickson also uses these general classifications of greatness and goodness (*Christian Theology*, pp. 289–326), as does Robert D. Culver (*Systematic Theology: Biblical and*

- ♦ **Greatness:** Self-Existence, Infinity, Perfection, Omnipotence, Omniscience, Omnipresence, Wisdom, Eternity, Immutability, Incomprehensibility
- ♦ **Goodness:** Holiness, Truth, Love, Righteousness, Faithfulness, Mercy, Grace

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD'S GREATNESS

The attributes of greatness are God's perfections in the metaphysical realm; those of goodness are His perfections in the moral realm.

Self-Existence

Self-existence is sometimes called God's aseity; others speak of it as God's independence, although Herman Bavinck is probably correct in differentiating the two. He notes that in Reformed theological nomenclature, aseity was replaced with the word *independence*. He says, "While aseity only expresses God's self-sufficiency in his existence, independence has a broader sense and implies that God is independent in everything: in his existence, in his perfections, in his decrees, and in his works."¹⁸ God is not only self-sufficient in His existence, He also possesses an infinite fullness of being in every possible dimension. Therefore, He is absolutely independent of all that is not God, infinitely

Historical [Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005], p. 65).

¹⁸ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–), 2:152.

distinct from all things created.¹⁹ This forms one of the most basic yet far-reaching truths in theology—the Creator-creature distinction.

This divine perfection means that the source or ground of God's existence is wholly in Himself. He is totally uncaused and is independent of all things external to Himself. He exists by the necessity of His nature; that is, His existence is not grounded in volition.²⁰ It is correct, then, to say that God is uncaused, *not* self-caused. By contrast, man does not exist of necessity. His cause of existence is outside of himself; he is dependent on God. In fact, all that partakes of creature-hood is dependent on God.²¹

God's self-existence is seen in His Old Testament names, particularly "I AM" (Exod 3:14). This is simply the Hebrew verb *to be* and shows that it is God's very nature to exist. God is the Absolute Being. His covenantal name, *Yahweh/Lord* (Exod 6:3), also likely derives from this verb *to be* and, among other things, denotes His self-existence. With God is the very "fountain of life" (Ps 36:9), both for Himself and all things external to Himself. God is independent of all things and all things have being because of Him. John records the twenty-four elders' around the eschatological throne affirming that "You [God] created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created" (Rev 4:11; cf. also Ps 94:8–11). Jesus explicitly teaches that God "has life in Himself" (John 5:26). God's independent self-existence is also implied in other places,

¹⁹ Interestingly, Erickson puts this attribute under "life" (*Christian Theology*, pp. 297–98).

²⁰ The only alternative to this is that God in fact is caused or is dependent on a cause outside Himself, which ultimately leads to the idea of the eternity of impersonal spirit and/or matter.

²¹ Further, the self-existence of God is to be clearly distinguished from the idea of infinite causation (the "billiard-ball theory"), where even God is caused, or, as it is otherwise put, He Himself *is* the infinite regression of cause and effect. This idea also stands in contrast to process theology, which says simply that everything, including God, is *becoming*. To the contrary, God is infinite being, not becoming.

specifically in texts indicating His (1) thoughts (Rom 11:33–34); (2) will (Dan 4:35; Rom 9:19; Eph 1:5); (3) power (Ps 115:3); and (4) counsel (Ps 33:11).²²

EXCURSUS: INDEPENDENT SELF-EXISTENCE AS IMPASSIBILITY—“CAN GOD SUFFER?”

The independence of God is sometimes referred to as God’s *impassibility*, which emphasizes that God, in distinction from man, is not of necessity affected by things external to Himself. Robert D. Culver avers that systematic theology must affirm “that God’s inner, conscious essence is always undisturbed and unruffled by anything He created.”²³ Gordon Lewis similarly says that “God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.”²⁴

J. I. Packer suggests that impassibility does not preclude God’s having emotions. Instead, he explains, impassibility means that “no created being can inflict pain, suffering, and distress on Him at their own will.” God enters into suffering and grief “by his own deliberate decision,” and God has permanent joy “clouded by no involuntary pain.”²⁵ While Packer protects God from being emotionally victimized by suffering, he does permit God to have some kind of change in emotional state.

²² Cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 58.

²³ *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, p. 26. Culver has an excellent discussion of impassibility, see pp. 216–25. Also see Thomas G. Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 38: “God is impassible in that He does not undergo successive and fluctuating emotional states, nor can the created order alter Him in such a way so as to cause Him to suffer any modification or loss.”

²⁴ *EDT*, s.v. “Impassibility,” p. 598. Incidentally, Lewis does not hold to the idea of impassibility.

²⁵ *NDT*, s.v. “God,” p. 277.

Frame approaches the matter a bit differently. He says that God's emotions are not metaphysically or categorically different from His thoughts and decisions. He asserts that "Scripture does not distinguish 'the emotions' as part of the mind that is radically different from the intellect and the will."²⁶ He further argues that God can respond emotionally to what happens in the universe in the sense that everything He ordained is also "evaluated" by Him when it comes to pass.²⁷ "God responds (both transcendently and immanently) only to what he himself ordained. He has chosen to create a world that will often grieve him. So, ultimately, he is active, rather than passive."²⁸

Helpfully, Norman Geisler correctly connects God's impassibility to His self-sufficiency (Deut 10:4; 1 Chron 29:14; Job 22:2–3 [Eliphaz]; 35:6–7 [Elihu]; Pss 24:1; 50:10–12; Isa 40:13–14, 28; Rom 11:35–36) and His immutability (Num 23:19; Heb 6:18). He says, "Nothing in the universe can make God feel pain or inflict misery on Him. . . . His feelings flow from His eternal and unchangeable nature."²⁹ That is not to say that God is immobile; rather He "can and does act"; it is simply that "*others* [emphasis added] do not move him."³⁰ In short, "He cannot suffer action upon Himself by another."³¹

Scripture presents God as being afflicted, for instance, in all of Israel's afflictions (Isa 63:9). However, if nothing exists in man as it exists in God (and vice-versa), then it is better to understand such texts

²⁶ *The Doctrine of God*, p. 609.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 2:112.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114. He makes the further point that God has *sensitivity* but not *sentimentality* (p. 123).

anthropopathically. Therefore, while it is patently true that the God-man suffered in every *humanly* possible way, this suffering must not be attributed to the immutable and impassible Logos or His divine nature. Emotional upheaval can be predicated of His humanity only. Erickson well-captures the point, saying, “It seems best to think of God having empathy, rather than sympathy, for humans and their feelings. In other words, he knows what we are feeling, but does not necessarily experience that same emotion himself personally.”³²

It would seem, then, that any view which implies God does in fact suffer and is emotionally involved with creatures or that He undergoes constitutional/emotional change by these outside, created influences would contradict God’s immutability. And, in doing so, this would vitiate the biblical Creator-creature distinction, which is fundamental to all divine-human interaction. That said, since God is constitutionally changeless, He cannot change in Himself, even voluntarily.³³

As will be seen, immutability means that there are no temporal changes, sequences, or successions in God. He lives in a state of permanent and unalterable blessedness, an infinitely absolute happiness and satisfaction. He is “blessed forever” (Rom 1:25; 9:5), incapable of suffering grief or unhappiness, as humans define and experience them. In short, as Shedd notes, “God cannot be the subject of any emotion that is intrinsically an unhappy one.”³⁴

³² *Christian Theology*, p. 295.

³³ It should be noted again that God’s immutability does not mean immobility. His eternity or timelessness is not an everlastingly static present tense. His boundless fullness of being precludes any such abstraction.

³⁴ *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 166.

Infinity

Infinity means that God is without outside limitations. That is, He is not restricted or bound by time and space. Or, to put it another way, He has only the self-imposed limits of His nature and will. In theology, God's infinity, when related to time, is discussed as His *eternity*, and His infinity, when related to space, is discussed as His *omnipresence* or *immensity*. Further, while man can transcend time and space in his spirit, to some extent, God as the infinite, personal Spirit can rise absolutely above time and space (i.e., His *transcendence* and the Creator-creature distinction) and still be related to time and space (i.e., His *immanence*).

Strong's caution here is well-noted: "Transcendence is not mere outsideness; it is rather boundless supply within"—that is, His self-sufficient, self-affirming, self-maintaining boundlessness. Strong goes on to say that "this attribute of infinity, or of transcendence, qualifies all the other attributes, and so is the foundation for the representation of majesty and glory as belonging to God."³⁵

When the psalmist asserts that God's understanding is "infinite" (Ps 147:5), the phrase translated "infinite" is *'en mispar*, literally denoting "no number." That is to say, one cannot arrive at a number equal to God's level of understanding, much less His being. Anything, such as mathematics, which can be numbered is finite; it can be added to. However, God cannot be added to, being infinite. Gerald Bray concurs, noting that "God's infinity is qualitatively different from that of mathematics, in that it is

³⁵ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 255, 256. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:160.

boundless as well as endless.” Bray suggests that mathematics is “open-ended finitude,”³⁶ and the same could be said for time and space.

The Scriptures further describe God’s thoughts as too numerous to count (Ps 40:5). They also suggest that human beings cannot know the sum of God’s righteousness and salvation (Ps 71:15). Furthermore, God’s lovingkindness, His covenant fidelity, “will be built up *forever*” (Ps 89:2). Solomon confesses, in his temple dedication prayer, that “heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain [God],” much less a humanly-constructed building (1 Kgs 8:27). Paul speaks of God’s infinite wisdom, exclaiming, “How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways” (Rom 11:33).

To be sure, there are texts which speak of God’s limitations; however these refer to His *self*-limitation in some form. For instance, Jesus could not do many miracles in Capernaum because of their unbelief (Matt 13:58). In this case, God chose to react to their faith. That is to say, although Jesus was infinite in power, man’s unbelief was a self-imposed limit that He made on His work in Capernaum. In another place, the psalmist suggests that Israel “limited the Holy One of Israel” (KJV) in the wilderness wandering. The verb *tawab* (“limited”), however, could be translated *pained*, *grieved*, or *vexed* (so NIV and NASB). In fact, it seems the parallelism here would favor this alternative reading: “How often they rebelled . . . and *grieved* Him. . . . They tempted God, And *pained* the Holy One of Israel” (Ps 78:40–41).

One objection to God’s infinity would be that this makes Him unreachable. The truth, however, is that an infinite God is the only one that can truly be reached by man because only an infinite God can reach

³⁶ *The Doctrine of God*, p. 85.

down to man. Only the infinite God can cross the Creator-creature distinction. Further, His love, mercy, compassion, and grace, for example, are not limited by His metaphysical greatness.³⁷

Finally, the infinity of God has practical ramifications. For the righteous, God's resources are without limits. "[God] can love each Christian as much as if that single soul were the only one for whom he had to care."³⁸ For the wicked, the wrath of the infinite God abides on them (John 3:36). To be under the finite wrath of man is bad enough, but to be under the wrath of God is infinitely more awesome, as the author of Hebrews says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). God can devote all His wrath to someone as if that person were the only one for Him to hate or punish.

Perfection

God is complete in Himself; He has total integrity as the divine being that He is. He lacks nothing, falls short in nothing and is all that God ought to be. The basic Hebrew word for perfection is *tamim*, meaning *complete, whole, entire, or unimpaired*. The Greek word is *teleios*, which also denotes *completion*. God is "perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16). God's way is perfect (*tamim*) (Ps 18:30 NIV). God's law is perfect (Ps 19:7). Further, Jesus describes the heavenly Father as perfect (Matt 5:48), and Paul adds that God's will is perfect (Rom 12:2).

The Scriptures do indicate, on occasion, that creatures are in some sense perfect as well. Noah, for instance, is said to have been perfect

³⁷ McClain, "The Doctrine of God."

³⁸ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 256.

(*tamim*) among his contemporaries (lit. “in his time”) (Gen 6:9). Job likewise is said to have been perfect (*tam*) (Job 1:1). Satan himself was perfect (*tamim*) in his pre-fallen days (Ezek 28:15). He is described as having had the “seal of perfection” (*takenith*) and was perfect (*kalil*) in beauty (Ezek 28:12). Interestingly, the NASB chooses to translate *tamim* as *blameless* in the cases of Noah and Job. The word itself probably carries the thought of being *mature*; that is, these were what saints were expected to be for that dispensation and level of God’s revelation and dealings. Satan’s seal of *takenith* seems to carry the idea of symmetry or proportion, well-measured. And his beauty, described as *kalil*, probably denotes his being unimpaired, while his perfection (*tamim*) most likely signals moral blamelessness (as in the cases of Noah and Job). In short, these perfections are not on par with God’s level of perfection.

Further, perfection is demanded of creatures in Scripture, the classic text being Matthew 5:48: “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This may be explained in a number of ways. (1) It may refer to *final glorification*, since “be” is future in form (*esesthe*, future indicative of *eimi*). However, this would not fit the context very well and scholars treat the verb as imperatival in force, even though its form is future. (2) It may refer to *maturity*, in a comparative sense. That is, Christians are to be mature and complete on a finite level, as God is on an infinite level. (3) It may refer to a *restricted perfection*. Here some suggest that the perfection is limited by the context (vv. 43–47) in that believers are simply called to be perfect in their impartiality toward other people (i.e., to love them as God does). (4) It refers to an *ideal standard*. That is, God’s moral perfection is man’s ideal and ultimate standard. God could demand no less and still be God, despite man’s inability to attain such perfection. In other words, God has no sliding scale or varying degrees

of moral acceptability for others because He has none in Himself. The thought of “perfect” here is *complete goodness*, doubtlessly alluding to the Law’s demands that one conform to God’s holiness (Lev 19:2) and moral perfection (Deut 18:13).³⁹ This last option is to be preferred.

Omnipotence

Omnipotence means that, by His exhaustive power, God can do all things consistent with His nature and purpose. Frame adds that “God can do anything that is compatible with his attributes.”⁴⁰ God’s exhaustive power refers to His ability to produce effects. To put it another way, God can do all that He wills, but He will not do all that He can. Jesus can make children of Abraham from stones, but He will not (Matt 3:9). He could have called twelve legions of angels at the Garden of Gethsemane, but He would not (Matt 26:53). God’s omnipotence does not mean that He can make a wrong right or make a stone too great for Him to move. These may be philosophical mind-teasers, but they are theological asinities nonetheless, because such hypothetical suggestions are not objects of power. One might just as well ask if a nuclear explosion has the power to make $2+2=6$.⁴¹ In other words, there can be no such things as square circles or round triangles. As Culver helpfully notes, there is an important difference between “all things are possible” and “anything can

³⁹ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1981), p. 105. See also Louis A. Barbieri, “Matthew,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983–1985), 2:32.

⁴⁰ *The Doctrine of God*, p. 522.

⁴¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), p. 40.

happen.”⁴² Charles Hodge notes that it is no limitation on omnipotence when it cannot effect that which is not an object of power any more than God’s knowledge is limited by its inability to comprehend the absurd or His infinite goodness’s inability to do wrong. In short, omnipotence is being able to do all that one wills; to be unable to do what one does not will is not weakness.⁴³ In fact, self-restraint and self-limited power are really marks of true power.⁴⁴

Arminians and free-will theists say that in making free creatures, God of necessity limited Himself to the unpredictable free acts of those creatures. Thus, man has “authentic freedom”; he can always do other than what God wills. God, then, is not omnipotent but “omniscipotent.”⁴⁵ This is really a sad commentary on their concept of God. In fact, in ordinary human affairs, people are prosecuted for making something they cannot or will not control.

God’s omnipotence is taught in Scripture in various expressions. God is described, for instance, as “Almighty” (Gen 17:1; Rev 19:6). Job confesses, at the end of his trial, “I know that You can do all things” (Job 42:2). Jeremiah affirms, in a prayer, “Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You” (Jer 32:17). Isaiah speaks similarly, “The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired” (Isa 40:28).

⁴² *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, p. 90.

⁴³ *Systematic Theology*, 1:409.

⁴⁴ Here it could also be said that God has power over His power. That is, He is not a slave of His own omnipotence.

⁴⁵ See *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), particularly the statements represented here by Bruce Reichenbach (“God Limits His Power,” p. 108) and Clark Pinnock (“God Limits His Knowledge,” p. 146).

In addition to the original creation, there are other manifestations of God's omnipotent power.

LOCUS	REFERENCE	EXPLANATION
Nature	Job 26:7–14	God, among other things, wraps the waters in the clouds.
	Jeremiah 10:13	God makes lightning for the rain and brings wind out of its storehouses.
History	Daniel 4:17	Nebuchadnezzar learns that “the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows [power and authority] on whom He wishes.”
Men and Angels	Daniel 4:35	Nebuchadnezzar admits that God “does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.”
Satan	Job 1:12	God permits Satan to do things.
	Revelation 20:2	God casts Satan into hell.
Redemption	Ephesians 1:18–22	Redemption in <i>all</i> its related aspects, including the resurrection of Christ, is undoubtedly the greatest exercise of God's power. ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ While the greatest display of God's power, even this did not diminish God's supply in the least. This appears to be the implication of Job 26:14. That is, creation, and by legitimate extension, all the other manifestations noted above, were only a fringe, fraction or whisper of God's exhaustless and immense power. This means that God's power is expended virtually *without effort* (i.e., there is always just as much power remaining after the acts as there was before them).

Omniscience

Omniscience refers to God's immediate, simultaneous and eternal knowledge of all things past, present and future, whether actual or possible. To put it simply, God is all-knowing. Lewis and Demarest helpfully define omniscience saying, "Immediately, consciously, and comprehensively God is aware of all eternal, changeless reality (himself, his attributes, and his purposes, as well as the decisions and acts executing them) and all of the temporal reality that ever was, is, or will be."⁴⁷ Strong provides a slightly different view, suggesting that omniscience pertains only to God's knowledge of the universe, not to His self-knowledge, which Strong calls God's truth.⁴⁸ This, however, appears to be more of a philosophical quibble than an alternative definition, and it may also suggest that God derives His knowledge of the universe from the universe, which would be incorrect.⁴⁹

Theological Descriptions: Immediate and Simultaneous

God's knowledge is *immediate* (or intuitive and instantaneous); it is not demonstrative or discursive. God does not learn. He does not gain

⁴⁷ *Integrative Theology*, 1:231.

⁴⁸ *Systematic Theology*, p. 283. Here it should be noted that some theologians prefer (1) to speak of God's knowledge of Himself as *natural* or *necessary*, because it is within the very nature and self-consciousness of God, and (2) to speak of God's knowledge of all things outside of Himself as *free*, because it is based on His free, sovereign determination (i.e., His decree of all actualities or of whatsoever comes to pass) (see, e.g., Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 86). The former speaks of God's exhaustive knowledge of Himself as a tri-personal being and the latter is His knowledge of all things external to Himself. One is spontaneous with His essence and the other arises from His sovereign will (although technically, His will cannot be disjoined from His essence).

⁴⁹ Still, Strong does helpfully discuss God's knowledge under five headings or qualifiers: (1) immediate; (2) simultaneous; (3) distinct; (4) true (which he defines as simply corresponding to reality, which is problematic); and (5) eternal (*Systematic Theology*, p. 283). The first two will be fleshed out in the discussion to follow.

His knowledge by any temporal process such as induction, deduction, logic, comparison, use of the senses, or otherwise going from the known to the unknown. In fact, it is more accurate theologically to say that God is all-knowing than to say that He has all knowledge, although the latter is certainly true.

God's knowledge is also *simultaneous*, not successive. That is, He knows all things at one glance. He knows all in one indivisible, simultaneous act of intuition and cognition. He sees all objects of knowledge at once exhaustively and in their totality. His knowledge is not the result of any temporal process; it is, in that sense, *eternal*. As Bavinck says, "all things are eternally present to his mind's eye."⁵⁰

Geerhardus Vos notes that God's knowledge is not derived from its objects "but is exercised without receptivity or dependence." Further, God "draws His knowledge directly from the basis of reality as it lies in Himself. . . . God's knowledge of the world has its source in His self-knowledge. Since the world is a revelation of God, all that is actual or possible in it is a reflection in created form of what exists uncreated in God."⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:196.

⁵¹ *ISBE*, rev. ed., s.v. "Omniscience," 3:599. Cornelius Van Til philosophically calls this "reflection" an analogy wherein man's knowledge somewhat mirrors God's knowledge but is never identical to God's knowledge, since nothing exists in man as it exists in God (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969], esp. the index of "analogical thought," p. 385). This position is in clear contrast to the way process theology speaks of God's knowledge, describing it as always increasing, just as "God" is always becoming. Clark Pinnock, in an "evangelicalized" process theism, suggests that new information is flowing to God all the time. He is learning all the time.

One may also wonder whether man's knowledge is ever intuitive or immediate. Scripture suggests that it clearly is, particularly man's knowledge of God's existence. This knowledge is not gained through the learning process; rather, it is innate via the image of God. Still, it was implanted at a point in *time*, and, in a certain sense, it can be construed as a response to God's revelation elsewhere.

Scriptural Descriptions

Scripture says that God is “greater than our hearts and knows all things” (1 John 3:20). The abode of the dead is “naked” before God, being fully open to His view (Job 26:6; cf. Heb 4:13). God “looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:24). From heaven, God sees everything about the human race (Ps 33:13–15), including the details of everyday life (Ps 139:1–4; Prov 5:21; Matt 10:30) and the thoughts and intentions of the human heart (Acts 1:24). God “counts the number of the stars and gives names to all of them” (Ps 147:4). No sparrow falls apart from the knowledge of God (Matt 10:9). In short, God knows all past and future events; He declares the end from the beginning, including things which have not yet come to pass (Isa 46:9–11).

There are several other characteristics of God’s knowledge. First, God’s knowledge is perfect: “The one *perfect* in knowledge” (Job 37:16). Simply put, there are no errors in God’s knowledge; He, of course, knows about all errors, but He knows them as errors. Second, God’s knowledge is eternal; He “makes . . . things known from long ago” (Acts 15:18). God always has known, does know, and will know all things. Third, God’s knowledge always has moral purpose: “The eyes of the Lord are in every place watching the evil and the good” (Prov 15:3). His knowledge is not like a computer; rather He knows how to put it to good ends. In this sense, God is not just a timeless spectator, simply seeing everything from above and all at once (akin to the Goodyear Blimp). To the contrary, His knowledge sees all things in light of His own character, plan, and purpose. Fourth, God’s knowledge is active, not static. That is, God’s knowledge corresponds to His boundless inner energy (i.e., His life) and

His omnipotence, with reference to all things external to Himself. He is, therefore, the “knowing . . . and thinking God.”⁵²

Excursus 1: God’s Knowledge of Possibilities

One area that is often debated is the nature of God’s knowledge of possibilities. That God knows possibilities seems patently clear from Scripture; however, it is what this sort of knowledge entails or excludes that is problematic. For instance, when David was fleeing for his life from Saul, he asks God, apparently through the Urim, if the men of Keilah would surrender him to Saul. God says that they *would* do so if he stayed there, so David takes another course (1 Sam 23:11–12). In another place, Jesus says that if Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom had heard the revelation of God which Chorazin and Bethsaida did, they *would have* repented (Matt 11:21, 23). Talking about what *would* happen raises a number of questions about God’s plan for and knowledge of future events. A four-fold clarification of this phenomenon is offered.

First, it must be emphasized that there are no unexplored possibilities in the universe. All possible things and events, under every possible kind of circumstance, are known to God. That is, God knows all that *could* happen.

Second, God knows all possibilities *as possibilities* (or as ideas).⁵³ God does not foresee these *as* future events or as certainties. Theologically, this is sometimes referred to as God’s “speculative knowledge.”⁵⁴ Along these lines, some things are simply not objects of God’s knowledge in

⁵² Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 85. God, therefore, has no sub-conscious. His intellect, as Hepp later notes, is “always . . . volitional, and [His] will is rational” (ibid., p. 90).

⁵³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:202.

⁵⁴ Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 73.

this sense. For instance, God does not know the possibility that He could sin. Of course, He knows the possibility that someone could think that thought. In fact, He has decreed to permit it and, thus, foreknows that a particular person will think it. Nevertheless, that He actually could sin is not a possibility that God's omniscience can entertain *as a possibility*.

It seems that God can know only what *could* take place and what *will* transpire. Some, however, suggest that God also knows what *would certainly* happen in every possible situation. That is, God knows, with respect to every possible free choice, what the actual decision would be. Philosophically, this is an idea known as *middle knowledge*, and it has its roots in the post-Reformation Catholic philosophy of the Jesuits and is behind the current resurgence of theological Arminianism.⁵⁵ Middle knowledge is also referred to as God's knowledge of counterfactuals, which is God's knowledge of contingencies that is logically prior to His decree.

There are, however, serious problems with middle knowledge, including the following.⁵⁶ First, it entails that, at some point, God's knowledge included pure contingencies. That is, God knew possible events as actualities (at least some form of actuality or certainty), not as non-actual possibilities. Second, and related, with such pure contingency, middle knowledge entails God's learning or gaining knowledge and that

⁵⁵ See David Basinger, "The New Calvinism: A Sheep in Wolves' Clothing," *SJT* 39 (1986): 483–99; William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); idem, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 141–64; idem, "The Middle-Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), pp. 119–43.

⁵⁶ Hoeksema responds with similar objections. He suggests, first, that middle knowledge is a denial of God's omniscience and, therefore, a denial of His sovereign control of the universe. "It is," he says, "a knowledge of ever-recurring and ever-multiplying possibilities that is contingent upon man's will and choice" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 89). He then suggests, secondly, that middle knowledge entails a false concept of human freedom, saying that biblical freedom means that man "remains the rational and moral subject of his own actions, and as such is responsible for them." In other words, he is "the conscious and willing subject of his own actions. . . . He chooses and determines and acts in accord with his inner nature" (*ibid.*, p. 90).

this knowledge is based on something other than His will. In fact, it entails that this knowledge is based on the (absolutely) free choices of men, a brand of freedom known as *libertarian* freedom (i.e., total human rational, psychological, and volitional indifference). This, of course, denies God's omniscience as traditionally understood. Third, middle knowledge entails God's mind being cluttered with erroneous information. That is, of all the infinite possibilities for an action or event that God "knows" in His middle knowledge, only *one* is true, and that is the one that actually comes to pass (which God learns *ex post facto*). Accordingly, the "infinite possibilities" actually become infinity minus one! That is, infinite data minus one datum means that all but the one datum that is certain is erroneous knowledge in God's mind.

As noted above, 1 Samuel 23:10–13 raises some of these issues and, not surprisingly, it is frequently used by proponents of middle knowledge. However, it is best to understand the text as giving God's knowledge of the *purpose* of the men of Keilah, that is, what they *intended* to do. It is not what they *will* certainly do, as one of an infinite number of pure contingencies to which God must react to rescue David (to say nothing of the whole covenant program of Israel and the house of David)⁵⁷ and the rest of human history.

Third, God's knowledge of possibilities is due to His *reason* and *power*. He knows all that He can do. Therefore, He knows future actualities as actualities and possibilities as possibilities because the future proceeds according to His *purpose* and *plan*.

Fourth, God's knowledge of possibilities does not mean that God carries all kinds of useless knowledge of an infinite number of

⁵⁷ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 89.

possibilities as excess baggage in His mind. This is so for the following reasons. (1) The number of possibilities in a created, finite universe is not infinite. While there may have been an infinite number of possible finite universes in God's mind, there are not infinite possibilities in a finite universe.⁵⁸ (2) God's knowledge is, as noted, always related to purpose (Prov 15:3), even His knowledge of possibilities. (3) God cannot know a pure contingency; it is not an object of knowledge. His omniscience concerns everything that is an object of knowledge.⁵⁹

Excursus 2: God's Knowledge of Human Action

Another persistent theological question in this area is whether God knows (foreknows or foresees) the free acts of men. That He does seems rather obvious, considering all of the Scripture's prophetic material is predicated on this fact. For example, God foreknows the free acts of the eschatological Assyrian in great detail (Isa 10:5–11). Or, in another place, God foreknew Cyrus (by name, even) and what he would do for Israel, announcing it a century and a half before Cyrus's birth (Isa 44:28; 45:13; cf. Ezra 1:1–3).

The free choices of men do not increase God's knowledge. It is not as if man's actions rest on pure contingency (*chance*) and cannot be known, even by God, until the choice or act is made. Further, if man's actions are predicated on a contingency, God knows the contingency. He knows it

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Apparent contradictions to such an assertion can be found. For example, Moses says that God tested Israel in the wilderness to see what was in their hearts (Deut 8:2). Clark Pinnock says that texts like this show that God learns things, participates in the temporal process of learning, and responds on the spot to His creation's vicissitudes. God is, Pinnock asserts, "changeable in his knowledge" ("God Limits His Knowledge," p. 155). In fact, prayer, in Pinnock's opinion, shows this to be true. In sum, the future is open, not closed, even for God (p. 152). In response it may simply be said here that God was not seeking new information in the case Moses recounts. God was not ignorant of what was in their hearts. He was simply testing them to show His fairness in dealing with them by exposing their natures (see further discussion below).

because He has planned it. In this case, it is not a pure contingency but only a temporal, creaturely *if*, that has been fully planned and executed by God. It is a contingency only from a human point of view. Granted, *how* all of this is worked out in God's knowledge is a mystery to man, part of the larger sovereignty/freedom problem, which will probably *never* be comprehensible to a finite mind. Still, it must simply be affirmed that God knows all of these things because He has decreed them.

Clark Pinnock demurs. He says that God cannot know free acts, precluding even a traditional understanding of prophecy. Pinnock rejects the traditional view, calling it the "crystal ball variety of divine omniscience,"⁶⁰ and prefers to believe there is "genuine novelty in the universe which cannot be predicted even by God."⁶¹

If God does know future events, then the events are certain. Still, God's omniscience itself is not causative. It is not predeterministic, but it does assume or presuppose predetermination or predestination. The difference lies in the fact that all free acts are causally determined by God, but the causation is non-constraining.⁶² God knows future events because He has decreed them. He has predestined whatsoever comes to pass, so He knows as a certainty what will come to pass.⁶³ If future events are *not* certainties, as God knows them to be, then God's knowledge would be erroneous. Again, God cannot know a pure contingency because, being non-existent, it is not an object of knowledge. Pure chance simply does

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 158.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 150.

⁶² Indeterminists (like Pinnock) suggest that one is not free if he could *not* have done otherwise, something known as contra-causal freedom or the liberty of volitional indifference.

⁶³ The permissive and directive aspects of God's decree will be dealt with in chapter 9.

not exist, even as a possibility, in a universe created and controlled by the God of the Bible.

And, it must be remembered that the future is future only to human beings. To God all events and objects of knowledge are a single act of eternal intuition. Technically, God has neither memory nor foreknowledge (prescience) because the whole of His knowledge is simultaneously and perpetually present. But, He is able to see in one instant all sequential events. In this sense, He knows the future.

Finally, in the traditional understanding of God's omniscience there is great benefit for believers. God knows their needs before they even ask Him. For example, in the Millennium, the divine promise is, "Before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear" (Isa 65:24; cf. Matt 6:8). Or, as David says, the wanderings and tears of God's people are fully known to Him (Ps 56:8). In short, for there to be true, absolute communion with God, He must be all-comprehensively cognizant of the life of every person at every moment.⁶⁴

Omnipresence

Omnipresence means that God is in the universe, everywhere present at the same time, filling every part of it with His whole being. God is transcendent or *above* everything created, and He is also immanent or *in* creation in His whole infinite being.⁶⁵ Some theologians include this discussion under the attribute of *immensity*, which also includes the aforementioned doctrines of immanence and transcendence. Technically,

⁶⁴ ISBE, rev. ed., s.v. "Omniscience," by Geerhardus Vos, 3:599.

⁶⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 75.

what theologians mean by immensity, though, is negative in force, the counterpart of omnipresence. In other words, immensity means that God is not limited by or confined to space. Omnipresence is, then, more positive in force: God is everywhere present.

Scripture is replete with evidence of God's omnipresence. For instance, David, well-recognizing the practical realities of this idea, asks, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence" (Ps 137:7; cf. also vv. 8–10). His son Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple reflects a similar thought, specifically the futility of thinking God could be confined to a building: "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You" (1 Kgs 8:27). In another place, God rhetorically asks the false prophets in Jeremiah's day: "'Am I not a God who is near,' declares the Lord, 'And not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him,' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill the heavens and the earth?'" (Jer 23:23–24). Paul likewise tells the godless philosophers at Athens that the true God was not far from each one of them; therefore they *should* seek Him (Acts 17:27).

The omnipresence of God is helpfully explored along five lines. First, omnipresence does not mean that God is everything and everything is God (i.e., pantheism). God is a spiritual being. He fills the universe with His personal, metaphysical presence, but this filling is not in a space-mass fashion. Further, God's presence in the universe is free, not necessary or compelled. If God were indeed *everything*, He would be in a necessary relationship to everything.

Second, omnipresence does not mean that part of God is in one place and part of Him is in another. He is everywhere present in His whole being. This is what is entailed by the doctrine of God's simplicity; He is indivisible. His incorporeal, spiritual being cannot be divided

and parceled out to various places. Omnipresence is, thus, an infinite extension of God's indivisible being. God dwells in all things in His whole metaphysical being, but He does not dwell in everything or everyone in His fullness bodily. This latter idea is only accomplished in Jesus Christ (Col 2:9) and results from the fact that Jesus is an extension of the divine essence itself, whereas the universe is not.

Third, omnipresence does not mean that God is everywhere present in the same sense. He does not dwell on earth as He does in heaven. He is not in animals as He is in man. He is not in the wicked as He is in the righteous. That is, the manifestations of His presence vary. He *indwells* believers savingly; He does not fill the entire universe in such a fashion.

Fourth, omnipresence entails God's personal presence, not simply the presence of His power. This is opposite the claims of Deism, which suggest that God's operations are still present, while God Himself is removed. To the contrary, God is present everywhere in His operations. As Grudem puts it, God is present to punish, bless, or sustain.⁶⁶ God's omnipresence expresses His immanence with reference to His creation. Further, while transcendent and atemporal, God, nevertheless, consciously relates to time, although this relationship is quite different from that of human beings. God's decree was made in the atemporal, eternal past, but it is executed by Him within the pattern of temporal sequences (Isa 37:26, "Long ago I did it, from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass").

Fifth, omnipresence does not involve God's displacing anything in space by His presence; that is, nothing is spatially excluded by the presence of God. Again, God's presence is metaphysical (i.e., spiritual)

⁶⁶ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 175–77.

not physical. As Samuel Storms says, "God is where everything else is."⁶⁷ Further, omnipresence and the effects of infinity do not suggest that God can expand.⁶⁸ Space and time are created, finite phenomena and, for created beings, are necessary forms of existence. But, since God is a pure, infinite and uncreated Spirit, space (in this case) cannot be a mode of existence for Him.⁶⁹

It may be asked how God can be in hell (Rev 14:10). Here a distinction must be made between God's metaphysical presence and His fellowshiping and communing presence. There is no *fellowship* with God in hell, nor in any number of places, say, for instance, in a snowflake. Yet, His indivisible, personal, metaphysical presence is everywhere. (Of course, this is not to imply that God is in hell or in the snowflake in the exact same sense.)

A related question is how an omnipresent God can be localized. For instance, the psalmist declares, "O You who are enthroned in the heavens" (Ps 123:1). Similarly, Jesus teaches believers to pray to the Father "who is in heaven" (Matt 6:9). The tension, then, is that if God is omnipresent, in what sense is He confined to the locality of heaven, or anywhere else, for that matter. The answer is that God's presence is everywhere but it is not manifested in the same way everywhere. Strong correctly notes, then, that God's "most special and glorious self-manifestation is in heaven."⁷⁰ God has chosen to manifest Himself permanently in heaven until the eternal state. But, even until then, He has specially manifested Himself on earth at various times (e.g., 2 Chron 7:16).

⁶⁷ C. Samuel Storms, *The Grandeur of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 89.

⁶⁸ Smith concurs, saying, "The attributes of expansion should not be applied to [God]" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:133).

⁶⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 75.

⁷⁰ *Systematic Theology*, p. 280.

Omniscience

This means that God is all-wise. He has infinite wisdom. God applies His knowledge in such a way that the best means are employed to achieve the highest ends in order to glorify Himself the most. God is in absolute and perfect control of His knowledge. As Bray notes, “Wisdom is more than just intelligence, because it includes the ability to control and direct the mind.”⁷¹ God’s wisdom is not abstractly intellectual but is intensely practical. All of God’s being, including His knowledge, is dynamic, not static. To put it another way, wisdom is God’s knowledge with moral purpose.⁷²

Paul speaks of God’s wisdom, exclaiming its incomprehensibility: “O the depth of riches . . . of the wisdom of God” (Rom 11:36). In that same letter, Paul closes, ascribing glory to “the only wise God” (Rom 16:27). The psalmist anchors all God’s works in the world to God’s wisdom (Ps 104:24; cf. Rom 8:28). In fact, Paul says that the church will be in God’s eternal trophy case as a testimony to “the manifold wisdom of God” in redemption (Eph 3:10).

Eternality

God’s existence cannot be measured by time. The past, present, and future of God’s existence are possessed by Him in one indivisible present. He has no before or afterward, no earlier or later. In fact, God transcends all temporal limitations and is without beginning or end.

⁷¹ *The Doctrine of God*, p. 219.

⁷² See the discussion by Shedd on the differences between wisdom and knowledge (*Dogmatic Theology*, 286–88).

As such God is the author or cause of time. Ryrie says that this means that God exists endlessly, saying, "His existence extends backward and forward (from our viewpoint) without any interruption or limitation caused by succession of events."⁷³ Storms agrees, adding that "God exists outside the temporal sequence altogether."⁷⁴ Grudem similarly suggests that "God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time."⁷⁵

Culver explains further that *time* must be understood as duration. God's relationship to time is such that He is above time.⁷⁶ Still, he suggests that "it does not seem quite correct to say that [God] lives in an eternal now, as we do occasionally read, for the past and future are present in God's mind as truly as the present."⁷⁷ He says further that "there is logical succession in God's thoughts but no chronological succession; since, however, creation does now exist in succession of events, God sees them and knows them. Time is therefore as *real* for God as it is for us."⁷⁸ To repeat a point made above in the discussion of God's independence and impassibility, the immutability of God does not mean that He is in the least immobile, nor does it suggest that, being eternal, God dwells in some sort of everlastingly static present tense. In sum, God's being in its perfect and dynamic fullness does not take

⁷³ *Basic Theology*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ *The Grandeur of God*, p. 64.

⁷⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 768.

⁷⁶ *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, p. 84.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

away from Him the reality of time. His relationships to His creation are anything but unreal or surreal to Him.

God's attribute of eternity is seen in numerous places. Abraham calls God the *Everlasting God* (*el 'olam*) (Gen 21:33). In his swan song to Israel on the plains of Moab, Moses says, "The eternal (*qedem*) God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting (*'olam*) arms" (Deut 33:27). And, in contrast to the earth and its mountains, which were always considered very ancient and almost eternal, Moses speaks of God's existence as "from everlasting to everlasting [*'olam*]" (Ps 90:2). Man is destined to wither as grass, the psalmist says, but God endures forever (*'olam*) (Ps 102:11–12). Job, wrestling with the incomprehensibility of God, notes that "the number of His years is unsearchable" (Job 36:26). God has "eternal purpose" (*aionon*) and His "eternal power" (*aidios*) is revealed in the natural order (Rom 1:20). Further, God is named the "King eternal" (*ton aionon*) in Paul's brief, but early confession of faith (1 Tim 1:17). And, John's Apocalypse describes God as the one "who was and who is and who is to come" (Rev 1:8; cf. 4:8).

God's relationship to time is very difficult to understand. *Time* is understood as a unit of measurement marked by a succession of events. It involves a relationship between changing things. In this sense, time began when God created the universe and the changing relationships within it. God then causes time through His creation, but He is not subject to time or anything finite. He is eternal and in His transcendence inhabits an atemporal eternity. Therefore, time on the human level receives its meaning from the creative hand of God, but time is not a mode of God's being.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ See Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), p. 157 and Smith, *Systematic Theology*, 1:134.

God transcends time in that He is *changeless*. He possesses His being in one indivisible present. He eternally is who He is; He is His own eternity.⁸⁰ His knowledge of all things is not only complete but simultaneous (a simultaneous act of eternal intuitive cognition), and He is everywhere simultaneously in His whole presence. He will not add to nor diminish in any respect of His person or being. In this sense, God's existence cannot be measured by time. As for man, he can rise above time in a feeble, finite sense, through memory, purpose, prediction, and communication. Man can, as well, know several things simultaneously; however, only God infinitely transcends time.

Immutability

Immutability, which is sometimes called God's *constancy*, means that God is changeless in His being and purposes. It also means that He is incapable of growth or decay in any respect. As Robert Reymond similarly says, God does not and cannot change "ontologically and decretally."⁸¹ God has not grown or diminished, learned or forgotten. He is not something today that He was not yesterday, neither is He more nor less holy, loving, or merciful than He ever was or will be. He has not added or subtracted, nor even diminished in any of His attributes.

Scripture emphasizes that God is unchangeable in several respects. First, God is unchangeable in His person and perfections. For instance, Malachi records God's claim to this effect: "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal 3:6).

⁸⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:163.

⁸¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 177. See also Bruce Ware, "An Evangelical Reformation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *JETS* 29 (1986): 431–46.

James suggests that with God there is “no variation or shifting shadow” (1:17). The author of Hebrews, contrasting Christ with creation, says,

You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; and they all will become old like a garment, like a garment they will also be changed, but You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end (Heb 1:10–12).

The same author later says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). Bavinck is then correct to note that, in contrast to God, creatures can change from non-being to being and from good to evil.⁸² Again, this is impossible for God, who is not only eternally uncaused ontologically but is infinitely perfect in every detail. He is the fullness of infinite and eternal morality. He *is* immutable moral law.⁸³

Second, God is unchangeable in His decreed purpose and plan. For instance, He announces through Ezekiel that “I, the Lord, have spoken; it is coming and I will act. I will not relent” (24:14). The psalmist asserts that “the counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (Ps 33:11). This characteristic extends to God’s redemptive plan. It, likewise, is immutable and incapable of failing. Paul affirms this with indubitable conviction: “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).

Third, God is immutable in His revealed truth, affirmations, and promises. He is not subject to a change of mind. He is “not a son of

⁸² *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:163.

⁸³ As noted, God’s immutable, eternal timelessness is not that of an everlastingly present tense. His boundless fullness of being precludes any such abstraction.

man, that He should repent" (Num 23:19). This is especially relevant to God's covenants with the nation of Israel and Israel's enduring relevance in Old Testament history and into the eschaton. Psalm 89, particularly verses 19–37, highlights this attribute and its relationship to the Davidic covenant, a covenant which gave David and his posterity permanent dynastic rights to the throne in the kingdom of God and which has as its ultimate fulfillment the great messianic reign of David's greater Son at the end of human history. The surety of these promises is summed up this way:

But I will not break off My lovingkindness [*chesed*, covenant love and fidelity] from him, nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David, His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful (vv. 33–37).

God speaks similarly through Isaiah, saying, "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed" (43:12). And, God is the one "declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (46:10). Further, "For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness (*chesed*) will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken, says the Lord who has compassion on you" (54:10). Micah also affirms God's covenant fidelity and His devotion to the promises made to Israel: "He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love (*chesed*). He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. You

will give truth to Jacob and unchanging love (*chesed*) to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old” (Mic 7:18–20).

Excursus: Can God Change His Mind?

Not only does the Bible repeatedly affirm God’s immutability, it also depicts God as repenting, or otherwise appearing to change His mind.⁸⁴ This has caused conflict in the minds of Christians and much disagreement among theologians. For instance, prior to the Genesis Flood, Moses writes that “the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth” (Gen 6:6). Later, in Exodus, at the incident of the golden calf, Moses says that “the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people” (Exod 32:14). Further, when Saul disobeyed God and spared the Amalekite king, along with some of the animals, the Lord said, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (1 Sam 15:11). The next day Samuel tells Saul that “the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind” (1 Sam 15:29). In another place, when an angel was to destroy Jerusalem because of David’s sin of census-taking, the text says that “the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel, ‘It is enough!’” (2 Sam 24:16). Later in Israel’s history, God tells Hezekiah that he would die. To this Hezekiah responds with a doleful prayer, lamenting his ensuing demise. God then, seemingly, changes His mind, adding fifteen years to the king’s life, even providing an authenticating miracle for His promise

⁸⁴ While the Hebrew word *nacham*, translated *repent*, *relent*, or *changed*, can mean a number of things—to be sorry, rue, repent, be relieved, or even comfort and console (BDB, s.v. “*nacham*,” pp. 636–37)—this does not entirely solve the problem. As Bavinck notes, Scripture describes God as “liv[ing] the life of his creatures and participat[ing] in all their changing states” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158).

(Isa 38:1–8). Again, God changes His mind about destroying Nineveh, when the city repented (Jonah 3:4–10). Other examples could be given.

The obvious problem revealed in these texts is how God can be immutable (or changeless) and still change His mind. To put it another way, how can it be said that God cannot change His mind in one passage and that God does change His mind in another. Since Scripture has but one system of truth and since this system is part of an infinite network of non-contradictory, unified truth, the solution cannot be settled by an appeal to contradiction, much less solved simply lexically or by a (pedantic) insistence on the notion of absolute human freedom. Biblical consistency (i.e., systematic theology) will have to prevail, or one must surrender ultimately to a theology full of unbiblical philosophical concepts, blatant contradiction, or just plain nonsense.

Some suggest that these and similar texts are to be understood as anthropopathisms (i.e., attribution of human emotions to God) in light of the doctrine of God's immutability.⁸⁵ Others understand them as anthropomorphisms.⁸⁶ Therefore, expressions that God was sorry, regretted, or changed His mind are designed to help human beings understand how an immutable God nevertheless responds to various situations. There is probably an element of truth in this, although not a full answer.

The “change” in these texts almost certainly relates to God's dealings and relationships with changing people. To be sure, in His nature, attitudes, and purposes God remains changeless. A good way to express this is that *an unchangeable God must change in His dealings with changeable men in order*

⁸⁵ W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 52–53. See also Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 381.

⁸⁶ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005), 2:75–76; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158.

*to remain changeless in His being and character.*⁸⁷ Again, immutability does not mean immobility. Instead, God's unchanging attitude, particularly in regard to sin, coupled with the presence of evil and free moral agents means that God's dealings change. That is, His manner of treating people changes; God changes orientation when man moves into a different moral relation to Him. As Grudem notes, repentance language implies "that God's previous action led to events that, in the short term, caused him sorrow, but that nonetheless in the long term would ultimately achieve his good purposes."⁸⁸ Grudem then asks, penetratingly, what it would be like if God *could* change. If He could change for the better, then He is not now the best possible; if He could change for the worse, then the possibility of an infinitely evil being comes in to view.

Still, a problem remains. Certain prophecies, stated without any qualifications, are said to involve a change in their divinely-promised fulfillment. In such cases, there must have been a tacit condition attached, allowing for the alteration noted. For example, Hezekiah was told that he should get his affairs in order because he would die and not live, yet, as noted, the outcome was that he prayed to God and lived another fifteen years. The implied condition was surely, then, that if he prayed, he would live. Jonah's cry to a pagan city was, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). What must have been understood, though unstated, was that the Ninevites would be destroyed *unless* they repented.⁸⁹ Jonah indicates an awareness of this condition, saying, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my

⁸⁷ As Bavinck similarly notes, "There is change around, about, and outside of [God], and there is change in people's relations to him, but there is no change in God Himself" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158).

⁸⁸ *Systematic Theology*, p. 165.

⁸⁹ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 565.

own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity” (Jonah 4:2). In fact, according to the royal decree issued, the king and citizens of Nineveh apparently knew of this contingency, “Who knows,” it says, “God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish” (3:9). In short, in these cases, the decreed will of God also carried the unrecorded decreed contingency, the secondary means to the ultimate end.⁹⁰

Process theology totally fails here. It says that God is always changing; He and the world have an interrelatedness of *mutual dependence*. All is in the process of *becoming*. In other words, God is developing in perfection. That is, the world adds something to God continually. Not much better is the open view of God or free-will theism. For instance, Richard Rice says that texts on God’s changelessness mean that He is reliable and He is dynamic in relation to the world.⁹¹ According to this view, God is affected by what happens; repentance is “among God’s essential characteristics,” part of “the qualities that make God what he is, that define the essence of divine reality.”⁹²

These theologians postulate an open universe of novelty and chance where anything can happen. This, in essence, crowds God into a corner of “omnicompetence” where He is constantly changing in order to cope with the vagaries of absolute human libertarianism, ultimate volitional

⁹⁰ For an excellent article exploring some of these problems, see Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions: An Inaugural Address Presented to the Faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary,” n.p. [cited 12 December 2007]. Online: <http://www.thirdmill.org/magazine/search.asp/keyword/pratt>.

⁹¹ “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 48.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 35. It seems even overdrawn to say, as Frame does, that “relenting is a divine attribute” (*The Doctrine of God*, p. 563).

autonomy, and the fundamental randomness of the universe. In the end, this robs God of His independence, indeed of all of His attributes, by substituting absolute becomingness or pure potentiality for His uncaused fullness of being.

Incomprehensibility

Incomprehensibility means that God cannot be completely known by a finite mind. He is eternally incomprehensible to a created, finite mind.⁹³ There is a legitimate question as to whether this is an attribute of God in the truest sense. Some choose not to call this an attribute but rather a description of human inability to understand God. Morton Smith, for instance, says it is not an attribute because God is not incomprehensible to Himself, nor are the persons of the Godhead to each other. It is not an *intrinsic* attribute but “has reference only to the knowledge that the creature may have of God.”⁹⁴ It seems preferable, still, to regard incomprehensibility as an attribute.⁹⁵

David says of God’s infinite knowledge: It is “too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain it” (Ps 139:6). “Wonderful” translates *peh* (*ineffable* or *incomprehensible*), which is described in parallel with “too high” and unattainable to human thinking (cf. Judg 13:18; Isa 9:6). Scripture further says that God’s greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3); His understanding is infinite (Ps 147:5); and His being of inexhaustible depth

⁹³ J. Carl Laney, Jr. calls this the inscrutability of God (“God,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003], p. 185).

⁹⁴ *Systematic Theology*, 1:105.

⁹⁵ The word wonderful (*peh*) is a name for the Angel of Yahweh (Judg 13:18) as well as a name for the Messiah (Isa 9:6), both referring to a person of deity. Generally, names in biblical thought indicate character and being.

(Job 11:7–9). Further, Scripture describes God’s thoughts as higher than man’s as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa 55:8–9), a euphemism for infinity. In other places it describes God’s judgment as unsearchable, His ways unfathomable (Rom 11:33), His revelation beyond human discovery (1 Cor 2:10–12), and His love unsurpassable (Eph 3:19).

Incomprehensibility does not mean that God is unknowable, as neo-orthodoxy (among others) suggests. A finite mind can know absolute truth about God, but it cannot know *all* the absolute truth there is about God. God does not need to be known exhaustively to be known truly and certainly. John says, “We know Him that is true” (1 John 5:20). Therefore, while incomprehensible, God is not inapprehensible. The Lord Jesus Christ, of course, is excluded from finiteness (except for His human nature). He is infinite and knows God completely and exhaustively (Matt 11:27).

Incomprehensibility does not mean that there are some things that God cannot reveal to us because He has not revealed them to us. On the other hand, statements, like Smith’s, seem to go a little too far when suggesting that “to assume that some areas are beyond the realm of revelation would be to assume that they are more ultimate than His essential being and Trinitarian relationships.”⁹⁶ Simply because God has revealed some of these things (e.g., Trinitarian relationships and divine sovereignty/ human freedom), it does not follow necessarily that these would be understandable to human, finite minds.

⁹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, 1:106.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD’S GOODNESS

The idea of God’s goodness is actually His perfection in the *moral* realm, as His greatness was His perfection in the *metaphysical* realm.⁹⁷ The attributes of goodness can be divided into two classes: (1) what God is in Himself (i.e., His character) and (2) what God is in relation to others (i.e., His activity) (see table below). Both are captured in Psalm 119:68—“You *are* good and *do* good.”

What God is in Himself	What God is to Others
Holiness	Righteousness (transitive holiness)
Truth	Faithfulness (transitive truth)
Love	Mercy (transitive love)
	Grace (transitive love)

Missing from the chart above is any mention of God’s wrath. This is due to the fact that wrath is a disposition, not an attribute. In other words, it is God’s settled opposition to sin and His necessary and inevitable reaction against sin. Wrath is sometimes called a transient disposition because it can be placated, pacified, or satisfied. God’s wrath is judicial in nature, based on His holiness as administered by His justice. And, it can exist simultaneously with His love. So, whereas love is a spontaneous

⁹⁷ The fundamental idea of goodness in theology is benevolence. See Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 248. Storms equates goodness with benevolence (*The Grandeur of God*, p. 118). In like manner, Ryrie defines goodness as God’s benevolent concern for His creatures (Acts 14:17) (*Basic Theology*, p. 39). Grudem suggests that peace (or order) is an attribute of God (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 202–203). However, this is doubtful.

attribute of God's being, wrath is a responsive, holy disposition brought out by sin.⁹⁸

Holiness

Holiness carries the simple idea of separation or apartness. It means *to be set apart from ordinary or common use* or *to be consecrated*. Both the Hebrew (*qadesh*) and Greek (*hagios*) terms carry the idea of separation. Interestingly, the term originally had no moral connotations. For example, a temple prostitute was a *qadeshah*, that is, one set apart for religiously *immoral* purposes (Gen 38:21). Mt. Sinai was also called holy (Exod 19:11–13). Similarly, the ground where a theophany occurred was also holy (e.g., Exod 3:5), as was the laver in the tabernacle (Exod 40:11). A house or field could be consecrated or set apart (Lev 27:14, 16). And, the tabernacle and, later, the temple had a “most holy place” (Exod 26:33; 1 Kgs 6:16). Not surprisingly, from this basic idea of separation, a transition was easily made to the idea of moral purity (i.e., separation from that which was sinful, unclean, or bad).

Characteristics of God's Holiness

God's holiness is specifically seen in two realms. First, it is seen in the idea of *apartness* from all that is created, a holiness of *majestic transcendence*. The song of Moses after Israel's Exodus from Egypt declares, “Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Exod 15:11). Psalm 99 contains

⁹⁸ See John Gill, *Body of Divinity* (reprint ed., Atlanta: Turner Lasseret, 1965), pp. 95–103. Grudem disagrees, calling both jealousy and wrath attributes (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 205–206).

a great paean of praise to God's transcendent otherness: He is "enthroned above the cherubim" (v. 1) and "exalted above all the peoples [Gentiles]" (v. 2); they are to "praise [His] great and awesome name; Holy is He" (vv. 5, 9). The prophet Isaiah exclaims similarly: "For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place'" (Isa 57:15). In Hannah's prophetic prayer God's holiness is tantamount to His uniqueness. She says, "There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed there is no one besides You" (1 Sam 2:2). In the Apostle John's apocalyptic vision, the four living creatures unceasingly proclaim, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come" (Rev 4:8).

Second and most common is God's separation from all that is ethically unclean, a holiness of *moral purity*. The theme of Leviticus, reiterated many times, is "for I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (11:44). God's ethical holiness is extolled by Isaiah, who declares, "But the Lord of hosts will be exalted in judgment [justice], and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness" (5:16). Both ideas of transcendence and moral purity are contained in Isaiah 6:1–5. Here the prophet sees the transcendent God on a lofty throne and immediately has to confess his moral uncleanness.⁹⁹ After this experience, Isaiah's favorite name for God is "the Holy One of Israel," a name used some twenty-five times. Habakkuk talks about God's holiness by saying that God's eyes are "too pure to approach evil" (1:13). Further, moral purity is the almost exclusive focus of the idea in the New Testament. Peter, for instance,

⁹⁹ This episode in the year of good king Uzziah's death appears to have been Isaiah's conversion experience, both to the God of Israel and to His covenant.

commands believers to be holy in all their behavior “like the Holy One who called [them] is holy” (1 Pet 1:15–16).

Theological Delineations of God’s Holiness

God’s attribute of holiness seems best summarized theologically by Strong’s three-fold delineation.¹⁰⁰ First, God’s holiness is purity of substance. God is pure in His being or moral nature. His being and will eternally conform to each other, but theologically speaking His being precedes His willing. God’s holiness as purity of substance asserts that His holiness is not merely negative; it is not merely the absence of sin or being free from wrong. It is not an abstraction or a vacuous state. Rather, holiness is positive—moral purity and rightness. Second, holiness is energy of will. Shedd emphasizes this when he defines holiness as “the perfect rectitude of [God’s] will. The divine will is in absolute harmony with the divine nature.”¹⁰¹ This well emphasizes the will aspect or the active aspect of the holiness of God. Still, God is not simply holy because He wills to be by divine fiat. To the contrary, God’s holiness is *active*; He actively conforms to His being in every way. And, as a personal being then, God *expresses*, not causes, His nature. Third, holiness is self-affirmation. Holiness is purity willing itself. It affirms or asserts itself as the highest motive and end. (In this respect, persons are holy when they will as God wills.) God is the Holy One because He wills in conformity with His being. God wills the good because it is good (in Himself), and it is good *because* He wills it (i.e., His self-affirming purity). Both are true and necessary. Hoeksema expresses this quite well, saying

¹⁰⁰ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 268–75.

¹⁰¹ *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 290.

that holiness is “[God’s] infinite, divine, ethical perfection, concentrated in and consecrated to Himself, i.e., that divine virtue according to which He eternally wills and seeks and is consecrated to Himself only.”¹⁰²

Excursus: Holiness as God’s Fundamental Attribute

God’s holiness is His fundamental attribute. While some theologians treat holiness synonymously with the entirety of God’s moral perfections, there does seem to be justification for seeing holiness, as understood here, as the attribute which governs the other attributes of God’s goodness (or, His moral attributes). This, of course, is a theological prioritization and is not meant to suggest that God was originally simply holy and added the rest of these attributes of goodness. This is also not meant to suggest that God’s holiness is more important than the rest of the attributes or that these other attributes eventually can be dispensed, theologically. Dabney helpfully says that “[God’s] moral attributes may be said to be qualified by the consummate moral attribute—holiness—the crowning glory of the divine character.”¹⁰³

The Bible suggests this prioritization, in some senses. For instance, God’s name (i.e., His being, character, essential nature) is holy (Isa 57:15). His throne is holy (Ps 47:8). God swears by His holiness (Ps 89:35; Amos 4:2). That which impresses the seraphim is God’s holiness, as is seen in the trisagion of Isaiah 6:1–3 (cf. Rev 4:8): “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Further, in the Lord’s prayer, God’s ethical holiness (“Hallowed

¹⁰² *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 94. Hoeksema says similarly later on that “[God] is absolutely consecrated to Himself only” (p. 97). He reiterates again, “Of the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit the Triune God is consecrated to Himself, is absolutely self-centered, as the only God” (p. 98).

¹⁰³ *Systematic Theology*, p. 151. See also Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 73; Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 271–75, 713–14; Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), pp. 449–52; and Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, pp. 229–45.

[holy] be Your name”) is placed first, immediately after acknowledging God’s transcendent holiness (“Who is in heaven,” Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2). Theologically, then, it can be argued that not all of God’s acts are acts of love (or mercy or grace), while all are acts of holiness. That is to say, when it comes to *dealing with sin*, holiness punishes, while love, grace, and mercy chasten.

If holiness is a governing moral attribute, one may well ask what its precise relationship is to God’s other attributes, such as love. It can be said that holiness is God’s self-maintenance or self-affirmation and love is God’s self-impartment. So before God can give, there must be something to give. In this sense, love is understood as God’s desire to impart His holiness.

Some do make love the primary moral attribute, suggesting that love is God’s primary motive. That is, all creation, these say, was designed and made to satisfy God’s love. Chafer, for instance, asserted that “as no other attribute, love is the primary motive in God, and to satisfy His love all creation has been formed.”¹⁰⁴ But love is not self-regulating and self-directing; therefore, holiness must govern love because love in and of itself tends to be capricious. And, that which regulates or forms a standard for love must, in this sense, have priority over it. In short, God’s holiness regulates God’s love. As Strong suggests, “Holiness is the track on which the engine of love must run.”¹⁰⁵

For the open view of God, discussed earlier, God’s love is indeed primary. As Richard Rice notes, “Love is central, not incidental, to the nature of God. . . . It is the one divine activity that most fully and vividly

¹⁰⁴ *Systematic Theology*, 1:205. See also J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1965), pp. 93–94.

¹⁰⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 272.

discloses God's inner reality. Love, therefore, is the very essence of the divine nature. Love is what it means to be God."¹⁰⁶ To satisfy His love, these theologians posit, God made mankind significantly free, allowed genuine novelty in the universe and lovingly responds to unforeseen and unplanned actions/situations created by these free creatures. This is, though, an overuse and, thus, a misuse of God's love.

Here it is also necessary to discuss the relationship between God's holiness and His righteousness. Holiness manifests itself in righteousness. In fact, holiness creates a perfect standard or right. And, God's righteousness is conformity to this perfectly right standard—God's holiness. (Similarly, man is righteous when he conforms to God's standard of righteousness.)

Further, God's justice is God's perfect equity or fairness in the administration of the absolutely right standard of holiness. Justice is, in this sense, an expression of God's holiness in its judicial activity, something which gives everyone his just due and treats everyone according to his own deserts. God's justice is the ethical basis of the atonement of Christ. This basis is comprised of two components of God's justice. First, there is God's *retributive* justice, which is exhibited in wrath and punishment. God's holy wrath is aroused by sin (non-conformity to God's standard of holiness) and God's holy justice visits this sin in the form of appropriate retribution. This requirement of payment for sin explains the need for the passive obedience of Christ. The atonement satisfies the demands of perfect justice in this regard. Second, there is also God's *remunerative* justice, which is exhibited in His goodness. Here

¹⁰⁶ "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," p. 19; also pp. 15, 18, 21. Also see Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 125.

God rewards all conformity to His perfect standard of holiness out of His love to impart holiness. And, for anyone to be accepted by God, he needs absolute, perfect, and infinite merit. This requirement explains the need for the active obedience of Christ. The atonement satisfies the demands of justice in this regard.

Finally, a few more relationships are helpfully explored. First, the relationship between God's holiness and His truth is seen in that truth is God's being and knowledge eternally conforming to each other. It is God's eternal, intellectual self-consistency. God's truth, then, is *holy* truth. As discussed above (see "Omniscience"), God's knowledge always has moral purpose. Second, the relationship between God's holiness and jealousy is that God's jealousy is God's holy love that demands exclusive attention (Josh 24:19, "He is a holy God. He is a jealous God"). It is God's desire to possess His objects; it is an assertion of God's moral (i.e., holy) claims and His moral right to the exclusive possession of His people. It is an assertion of His absolute right to first place everywhere and in everything.

Truth

The Old Testament words for truth are *'amen* and *'emeth*. These words carry the idea of truth in certain contexts, although they also sometimes carry the thought of faithfulness (along with other words from the *'aman* root). Within the idea of *true*, these words seem to convey the two thoughts of *veritable* and *veracious*. The New Testament words for truth are *alethinos* and *alethes*. *Alethinos* is the true against the spurious—that which is *genuine*, *veritable*, *actual*, and *authentic*—whereas *alethes* is the true against the false (or what is a lie)—that which is *veracious* and *truthful*.

Characteristics of God's Truth

God is, therefore, true in at least three theological senses. First, God is the true or genuine God in that He alone in His being, attributes, and activities conforms to all that God ought to be. This is simply to say that God is who He is. He answers to no standard outside of Himself. He is His own criterion of what God should be. He alone fully answers to the idea of God.¹⁰⁷ As Ryrie says, truth means “agreement to that which is represented” and includes the ideas of veracity, faithfulness and consistency. Therefore, to say that God is true is to say that “He is consistent with Himself, that He is all that He should be, and that He has revealed Himself as He really is, and that He and His revelation are completely reliable.”¹⁰⁸

God as the true in this sense is seen, for instance, in 2 Chronicles 15:3: “For many days [probably referring to the period of the Judges] Israel was without the true [*emeth*] God.” Likewise, Jeremiah proclaims that Yahweh is the true or genuine (*emeth*) God (Jer 10:10). Further, Jesus defines salvation as knowing the only true (*alethinos*) God (John 17:3). Paul speaks of the Thessalonians’ evidence of genuine conversion in the fact that they were now serving “the living and true [*alethinos*] God” (1 Thess 1:9; cf. also 1 John 5:20; Rev 3:7; 6:10, which all use *alethinos* with reference to God).

This idea of God as true is amply reinforced by other Old Testament expressions where the *‘aman* group is not used. For instance, Moses writes in Deuteronomy 6:4 that the “Lord is one [*Yahweh ‘echad*].” This term *‘echad* teaches not numerical unity (e.g., the three in one); rather, it stresses

¹⁰⁷ Erickson uses *integrity* in defining the trueness of God (*Christian Theology*, pp. 317–18).

¹⁰⁸ *Basic Theology*, p. 44.

uniqueness and *absoluteness*, the idea of the *only* one. This is seen in places where Christ, the millennial king, is described as “the only one, and His name the only one” (Zech 14:9). It is also seen when David asks, “For who is God, besides the Lord?” (2 Sam 22:32). Solomon too suggests this when he prays that Israel would obey God: “So that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no one else” (2 Kgs 8:60). Isaiah too records God’s claim that “I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. . . . There is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other” (Isa 45:5, 6). Jesus further corroborates this point when He chastises the praise-seeking religious leaders for not seeking “the glory that is from the one and only God (*monou theou*)” (John 5:44). Paul similarly says, “There is but one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:6; cf. Rom 3:30; 1 Tim 2:5).

Second, God is truthful in that His knowledge and declarations eternally conform to His being. He is the veracious God, knowing and representing things as they actually are. This is borne out in texts like 1 Samuel 15:29 when Samuel tells Saul: “The Glory of Israel will not lie.” The psalmist agrees, saying that “the Judgments of the Lord are true [*‘emeth*]” (Ps 19:9) and “Your word is truth [*alethes*]” (John 17:17). Paul likewise asserts that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). And, the author of Hebrews similarly says that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18).

Third, God truthfulness has its foundation in His being and nature. As the self-contained, self-consistent Ontological Trinity, God is the source of all truth. David suggests this when he says, “You have ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth” (Ps 31:5). John the Baptist, likewise, says that God is true (*alethes*) (John 3:33). The God-man says of Himself: “I am the . . . truth [*aletheia*]” (John 14:6). John, the apostle, says also that “the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6). This foundational aspect of God’s

attribute of truth is the basis of a truly Christian philosophy of truth. That is, truth is that which corresponds to the being and will of the God of truth. Any so-called truth or fact attains truthfulness, factuality, or intelligibility because each is in essence a theistic fact, being true because of its place in the eternal counsel of the God of all truth.

All the divine virtues and perfections belong to the God of absolute truth and integrity. God's kindness, for example, is genuine; it is all that kindness ought to be. And, God's grace will not become invalid when the whole truth is known about His gracious plan of redemption. Many such examples could bear out the point.

Love

McClain defines love as "that in God which moves Him to give Himself and His gifts spontaneously, voluntarily, righteously, and eternally, for the good of personal beings, regardless of their merit or response."¹⁰⁹ Strong's definition is likewise helpful: "By love we mean that attribute of the divine nature in virtue of which God is eternally moved to self-communication."¹¹⁰ Gordon Lewis suggests correctly that "love is a settled purpose of the will involving the whole person in seeking the well-being of others."¹¹¹ And, Ryrie says that "in God [love] is the perfection of holiness and all that concept implies. Love in God is seeking the highest good and glory of His perfections."¹¹² As a point of clarification, Lewis and Demarest rightly note that love is not to be

¹⁰⁹ "Doctrine of God."

¹¹⁰ *Systematic Theology*, p. 263.

¹¹¹ *EDT*, s.v. "God, Attributes of," p. 497.

¹¹² *Basic Theology*, p. 39.

classed as an emotional characteristic because “it involves commitment of the whole person, initiated in the will. Love is the settled purpose of will involving the whole person in seeking the well-being of others.”¹¹³

The Bible is the only source of the knowledge of God’s love. That is, God’s love cannot be found in nature or anywhere else in *authoritative form*. Evidently, God’s transitive love, in the sense of general benevolence, which of course is short of any redemptive ingredients, may be discerned from natural revelation (Acts 14:17).

Scripture is full of statements regarding God’s love. God is described as redeeming Israel, in His love and mercy (Isa 63:9) and sending an atoning sin-bearer as a demonstration of this love (John 3:16). Christian love is even spoken of as a mark of the persevering believer because “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Characteristics of God’s Love

In enlarging the idea of the love of God, a few specific clarifications are needed. First, God’s love is voluntary. It is under no compulsion, and it does not wait for a response from its object (e.g., “Not that we loved God,” 1 John 4:10). This is clearly seen when God speaks of “lov[ing] [Israel] freely [*nadab—voluntarily, willingly*]” (Hos 14:4). Second, God’s love is unselfish. It is not for personal benefit, that is, what God can get selfishly from people. Instead, God loves basically for what He can *give*, although He does receive glory in the giving. This point is especially seen in the divine election of Israel, where God’s electing love is demonstrated as sovereign and self-extending. God loved Israel simply because He loved them (Deut 7:7–8). Third, God’s love is righteous. It

¹¹³ *Integrative Theology*, 1:235.

is not sentimental. It does not condone sin, nor does it do wrong for the sake of the one loved. It is governed by God's holiness and always does right. This is seen in texts which speak of God's being righteous and loving righteousness (Ps 11:7) and justice (Ps 33:5). Jesus speaks of God's loving the world in a particular way or manner (John 3:16, *houtos*), namely in a manner that included the provision of an atonement for sin. God's love for the world was a moral love, involving the penal satisfaction of holy righteousness. In short, God loved the world in this way: *that He gave His Son*. Whereas holiness made penal satisfaction necessary, love made it voluntary. And whereas holiness demanded it, love endured it. Fourth, God's love is eternal. God is eternally self-giving, although not always to the same objects. His love is not fickle. God loves Israel with an everlasting, electing, covenant love (Jer 31:3). In Paul's words, "Love never fails" (1 Cor 13:8).¹¹⁴

Objects of God's Love

As McClain's definition above suggests, the objects of God's love are personal beings. McClain, however, further notes that "God's love requires an object which to some extent resembles Himself."¹¹⁵ God does not love nature, nor even animals, although He may be benevolent toward both because His benevolence extends to the non-rational creation (Matt 6:26, 28, 30; 10:39; e.g., lilies and birds). God, however, *loves* only personal beings.

Erickson is apparently not persuaded that God loves only personal beings. To begin with, his definition of the love of God does not specifically

¹¹⁴ In comparing vv. 8 and 13, it is evident that love, in contrast to faith and hope, is the greatest because it is enduring, whereas the others will eventually yield to something higher.

¹¹⁵ "The Doctrine of God."

designate the objects of God's love. He says, rather, "In general, God's love may be thought of as his eternal giving or sharing of himself."¹¹⁶ He further suggests that benevolence is an aspect of the love of God and argues that it extends to "subhuman creation."¹¹⁷ In fact, reasoning that "God loves and cares for all of his creation" (Matt. 6:26–30; 10:29),¹¹⁸ Erickson extends the love of God to ecological phenomena and the constituents of "nature" or purely material entities. He says, "Since inanimate material also comes from God, I am, at base, one with nature, for we are members of the same family."¹¹⁹ This reasoning, however, is certainly overdrawing the biblical testimony to the love of God. That is, objects of God's generic benevolence are not thereby necessarily objects of the divine attribute of love. In fact, Erickson's extension of the love of God in this manner seems to have more to do with social and environmental sensitivities than biblical/theological teaching.

God's highest and ultimate end is, as noted, to glorify Himself in all that He does. Therefore, His love is centered on those who to some extent reproduce His character and attributes, which again obviously excludes *non*-rational creatures. As Berkhof says, God "loves His rational creatures for His own sake, or, to express it otherwise, He loves in them Himself, His virtues, His work, and His gifts."¹²⁰ Therefore, His love will vary in its manifestation or expression according to the object's replication

¹¹⁶ *Christian Theology*, p. 318.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 320. The other three aspects of God's love—grace, mercy, and persistence—are confined to rational beings, according to Erickson (pp. 320–23).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 402; also p. 410.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 402–403.

¹²⁰ *Systematic Theology*, p. 71.

of Himself. Some theologians call this self-love, God's *complacent* love.¹²¹ It is His delight or satisfaction in His infinite perfections, including the reciprocal love among the three persons of the Trinity.¹²²

Because of this, God loves Jesus Christ in a greater sense than others because God's character is perfectly (one-for-one) manifested in Jesus. As Jesus Himself notes, "For this reason the Father loves, because I lay down My life that I may take it again" (John 10:17). At His baptism, the beginning of His earthly mission, God declares approvingly, "This is My beloved Son" (Matt 3:17). Relatedly, God loves believers because His character is being manifested in them, however imperfectly. Jesus testifies to this, saying that "if any one loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love Him" (John 14:23). Later that same evening Christ says of His followers: "For the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father" (John 16:27). Further, God loves the nation of Israel because His character is manifested in them, though quite imperfectly. He chose Israel to be His special people, and in the end times His character will especially be reproduced in them. In Jeremiah 31:3, God says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love," referring to Israel's national election. He speaks similarly in Hosea, saying, "When Israel was a child, then I loved Him," which again shows His electing love that brought about Israel's initial deliverance from Egypt. Finally, God loves all unsaved sinners because they are persons in His image (e.g., John 3:16, "God so loved *the world*").

¹²¹ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, 1:142–43.

¹²² As Hoeksema says, "God loves Himself. All the love and delight of His divine nature is directed to His own infinite perfections. Also in His love God is perfectly Self-sufficient. . . . He is not in need of a man's heart to be loved; He needs no object outside of Himself to love" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 106). Conversely, God's love of objects external to Himself is sometimes called His love of *benevolence*.

Erickson's summary of this point is helpful. He notes that God's love is not entirely for man's sake (which would jeopardize His glory) nor exclusively for His sake (which would compromise the intrinsic quality of love [i.e., its outgoing, giving nature]). Rather, "God loves us on the basis of that likeness of himself which he has placed within us (Gen 1:27)." And, like Berkhof above, he concludes, "[God] therefore in effect loves himself in us." In short, He does not love man entirely for His own sake but *ultimately* for His own sake.¹²³

Manifestations of God's Love

The Bible mentions numerous manifestations of the love of God, some of which can be listed here. First, God shows His love in His benevolence toward all people, as Jesus notes in Matthew 5:43–48; God causes the sun to rise and rain to descend on the righteous and unrighteous. Theologically, this is called *common grace*, that is, the non-redemptive favors that are transitive manifestations of God's benevolent love that go indiscriminately to all people. Second, God's love is displayed in the gift of His Son for the sin of the world (John 3:16). This may well be the superlative demonstrations of divine love (Rom 5:8, "But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"). Third, divine love is manifested in God's making believers His children. As John says, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are" (1 John 3:1). Fourth, God's love is seen brilliantly in His electing certain individuals to eternal life. Paul notes this, saying, "Knowing

¹²³ *Christian Theology*, p. 320.

brethren, *beloved* by God, His choice of you” (1 Thess 1:4).¹²⁴ Fifth, God’s love is seen in the chastening of His believer-children (cf. Prov 3:12, “Whom the Lord loves He reproves”; also Heb 12:5–8).¹²⁵

Complexities of God’s Love

Some apparent problems arise in understanding God’s love. For instance, God says of Israel, “All their evil is at Gilgal; indeed I came to hate them there! . . . I will love them no more” (Hos 9:15). The sense here involves God’s expulsion of Israel from covenant favor and blessing due to Israel’s idolatry; this text does not indicate that God’s love is fickle (cf. Jer 16:5).

In Malachi God makes a contrastive distinction between Jacob and Esau, saying, “I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau” (1:2–3). For purposes of national election, Jacob was chosen (loved) and Esau was rejected (hated).¹²⁶ Post-exilic Israel, here, wonders how God loved them and God responds by pointing to the past loving election of Jacob and His consequent passing over of Esau, all a result of His sovereign good pleasure. In essence, God emphasizes that Israel did nothing in the past to merit His benevolent attention and Edom (Esau) could do nothing in the future to undo their rejected status (Mal 1:3–4).

¹²⁴ “Beloved” translates the perfect passive of *agapao* and could be rendered “having been loved by God.” Also, personal election to salvation has many predication, one of which is the sovereign love of God. Other factors in the backdrop to divine election are the condemnation and total depravity/inability of the individual, the grace of God, and, of course, the sovereign will of God.

¹²⁵ These manifestations of God’s love simultaneously carry the converse that God hates evil. That is, as noted, God loves righteousness, but He hates evil (Ps 45:7). In fact, He hates all forms of evil (Prov 6:16–19; Zech 8:17), since evil destroys people made in His image. This hatred even prompts God’s command that believers likewise hate evil (Ps 97:10, “Hate evil, you who love the Lord”).

¹²⁶ Some of the purposes of national election were the following: (1) to exhibit God’s glory to the nations (Exod 19:5–6); (2) to receive revelation of God (Rom 2:1–2); (3) to be blessed with salvation and, subsequently, to bless the world (Ps 33:12; John 4:22); and (4) to bear the Messiah (Rom 9:5). All of these can be summed up into one overarching purpose, namely God’s own self-glory (Ps 79:9; 106:8; Isa 48:9, 11).

Further, a rather startling comment on God's attitude toward sinners is made by David in Psalm 5:5. There David says, "The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity." If, as was shown, God loves the world of sinners, how can it also be said that He hates them as well. The reason is that God can both love and hate the same objects at the same time because of the infinite perfections of His being. Therefore, there is a theologically legitimate sense in which God hates sinners. As a result, it is not quite correct to say that God loves the sinner but hates only his sin.¹²⁷ One cannot separate the sinner from the unforgiven, unexpiated sin which draws forth God's wrath and hatred. But, again, because the sinner is in the image of God and because of the universal benefits of the atonement which make him salvable, the sinner is also an object of God's love. Also, love is an attribute and hatred/wrath is, as already noted, a transient disposition, capable of being placated. If both were attributes, there would indeed be a conflict in God's nature.

A final complexity is the relationship between God's love (and His command for believers to love) and the apparently legitimate expressions of hatred on the part of some believers. David's words are representative: "Do not I hate those who hate You, O Lord?" (Ps 139:21; cf. also v. 22 and Pss 69:22–28; 109:6–20; 139:19a; et al.). Is it *right* for believers to hate others?

To answer this question, it must first be understood that this is an example of the Old Testament idea of *imprecation*. That is, believers would call the judgments of God down on sinners, even to the point of wishing them bodily harm and death. Some of the basic reasons for doing so were the following: (1) jealousy for God's name and His holiness; (2)

¹²⁷ Cf. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 290–91.

the close relationship between sin and punishment in the Old Testament theocracy; that is, these were petitions for God to fulfill His Word and respond appropriately to those who had violated His covenant or who hated Him; (3) the lack of details concerning *final* judgment; that is, *sheol* (death and the grave) and this life were the arenas of God's judgment in their minds; and, relatedly, (4) the lack of revelation of life under grace. In this final respect, New Testament believers have no basis to pray (or, otherwise utter) imprecations.¹²⁸

Righteousness and Justice

Righteousness means *conformity to a right standard, uprightness or rectitude, being right, or what is as it should be*. Righteousness in God, then, is that perfection of His character or that aspect of His holiness in which His actions and attitudes are always in conformity with His own perfect being or nature and by which He demands absolute conformity to perfect right in others. God's righteousness may be summarized under two headings: (1) the rectitude of God by which His actions eternally conform to His being and (2) the law of God which is the expression of His nature, that is, His perfect standard and the demand for absolute conformity.

Justice in God, as briefly noted above, is that aspect of His holiness by which He rewards conformity and punishes non-conformity to His perfect standard of right. This is sometimes called God's distributive justice of remuneration and retribution. Put simply: God gives to man

¹²⁸ Some may object, suggesting that Paul's sentiments in Galatians 1:8–9 point otherwise. Here however it must be noted that Paul speaks these words under inspiration and, as such, hardly represents a normative precedent for all Christians everywhere.

what is due him. He rewards righteousness because of its merit and He punishes sin because of its intrinsic demerit.

Characteristics of God's Righteousness and Justice

The Old Testament (*tsadiq*, *tsedeq*, *tsedeqah*) and New Testament (*dikaiois*, *dikaioisune*) words for righteous and righteousness mean conformity to a proper standard or norm. The Hebrew *tsadiq* has a basic meaning of *straight*, *firm*, or *hard*. Moses suggests God's righteousness positively means He is righteous (*tsadiq*), just and upright, while at the same time negatively meaning He is "without injustice" (Deut 32:4). David also says that "the Lord is righteous" (Ps 11:7) and that He "is righteous in all His ways" (Ps 145:17). In another place, the psalmist describes righteousness and justice as the foundation of God's throne (Ps 89:14). Jeremiah likewise notes that Yahweh's throne is the very habitation of righteousness (Jer 50:7). And, most remarkably, the cross of Christ demonstrates publicly and absolutely the righteousness of God (Rom 3:21–26).

There are also numerous texts which speak of God's justice. Abraham asks, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen 18:25). Paul says that "God will render to every man according to His deeds" (Rom 2:6), and Peter says "the Father . . . impartially judges according to each one's work" (1 Pet 1:17).¹²⁹

Manifestations of God's Righteousness and Justice

These are manifested in a number ways, among which are, (1) God's requirements for the daily activities of human beings, illustrated

¹²⁹ It should be noted here that there are two kinds of divine righteousness in Scripture. One is that which is accomplished by Christ on the cross of Calvary, which is subsequently imputed to believers and on which basis they are declared righteous (or *justified*, Rom 3:21–23). The other is the attribute of God's righteousness, which is presently under discussion.

by His stipulations regarding *just* weights, containers, and the like (Lev 19:35–36); (2) God’s punishing the wicked (Rev 16:4–7, “Righteous are You . . . because You judged these things. . . . They deserved it”); (3) God’s rewarding the righteous, noted by the author of Hebrews when he says, “God is not unjust to forget your work and the love which you have shown . . . in having ministered”(Heb 6:10); (4) God’s chastening His people, as Daniel notes, God was “righteous with respect to all His deeds” (9:14) including the calamity He brought on Israel; (5) God’s forgiving of sins, as John notes, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9).

Faithfulness

God’s faithfulness is His trustworthiness to act or perform in accordance with His word, promises, or sayings. In this sense, God “does not commit Himself to something of which He could eventually prove incapable.”¹³⁰ The Old Testament words (*'aman*, *'amen*, *'emuna*, *'emeth*) and the New Testament word (*pistos*) for faithfulness connote being *firm*, *steadfast*, *reliable*, *trustworthy*, and *faithful*. The idea is that if God is true in Himself, He will be faithful to others. In other words, faithfulness is God’s transitive truth.

Characteristics of God’s Faithfulness

The Exodus from Egypt was a giant demonstration of God’s faithfulness to the covenant (Deut 7:8–10). David says that God’s faithfulness “extends to the heavens” and “reaches to the skies” (Ps

¹³⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 317.

36:5), continuing on to praise God's fidelity to His Word (119:90; cf. the psalmist of 89:1, 2, 5, 8). In the midst of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, when the people were reduced to cannibalism, Jeremiah could exclaim, "Great is Your faithfulness" (Lam 3:23; cf. 2:20; 4:10). In that same context and historical situation, God's "lovingkindness"—His covenant love, fidelity, and faithfulness (*chesed*)—is extolled (Lam 3:22).

Manifestations of God's Faithfulness

There are many manifestations of God's faithfulness noted in Scripture. For instance, God keeps His promises. The author of Hebrews says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:23). Second, God preserves His people in times of testing. As Paul says, "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able . . . but will provide a way of escape" (1 Cor 10:13). Third, God answers prayer. David prays, "Hear my prayer, O Lord. . . . Answer me in Your faithfulness" (Ps 143:1). Fourth, God forgives sin. John writes, God "is faithful . . . to forgive our sins" if we confess them (1 John 1:9). And, fifth, God sends afflictions in His faithfulness. David writes, "In faithfulness You have afflicted me" (Ps 119:75). This is meant probably in the sense of not sending more than can be borne, always being there to aid and working out greater purposes (on this latter idea, cf. v. 71, "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes").

Mercy

God's mercy is His compassion, pity, kindness, tenderness, and gentleness toward miserable sinners. Strong defines mercy as "that

eternal principle of God's nature which leads him to seek the temporal good and eternal salvation of those who have opposed themselves to his will, even at the cost of infinite self-sacrifice."¹³¹ Some define mercy in a rather negative sense as God's withholding deserved judgment,¹³² but this is probably best considered as longsuffering, which is entailed in the overall idea of God's mercy.

Characteristics of God's Mercy

The principal Old Testament word for mercy is *racham*, which is a word expressing a deep and tender feeling of compassion and pity (lit., *bowels*). The principal New Testament words are *oiktirmos* (compassion, pity, mercy; lit., *the viscerals*) and *eleos* (mercy, kindness, goodwill). The vast majority of the texts on mercy are found in the Old Testament; however, the New Testament is full of the *idea* of mercy, such as that shown toward the two blind men (Matt 9:27), the Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter (Matt 15:22), the demon-possessed man (Mark 5:19), the beaten and robbed traveler in the good Samaritan account (Luke 10:37), and the plea of the rich man in Hades (Luke 16:24, "Have mercy on me . . . for I am in agony in this flame").

Also prominent in the biblical idea of mercy is "the compassionate disposition to forgive an offender or adversary and to help or spare him in his sorry plight."¹³³ For instance, Moses speaks of God as the compassionate God (*ʿel rachum*, Deut 4:31). David calls on the Lord to remember His compassion (*racham*, Ps 25:6) and further notes that

¹³¹ *Systematic Theology*, p. 289.

¹³² For example, Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:235.

¹³³ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Mercy," 2:1440.

God crowns the believer with compassion (*racham*, Ps 103:4). Zechariah prophesies that in the eschaton the Jews, though under the miseries of the Antichrist, will see God triumphantly return to Jerusalem with compassion (*racham*) to build their millennial temple (Zech 1:16). Paul writes of God as “the Father of mercies” (*oiktirmos*, 2 Cor 1:3).

Manifestations of God’s Mercy

Some manifestations of God’s mercy are seen in the following ways. First, God’s mercy is seen in His saving lost sinners (e.g., “rich in mercy,” Eph 2:4–8; also Paul’s experience of the same, 1 Tim 1:3). Second, God’s mercy is seen in His caring for His creatures. David describes God’s mercies as “over all His works” (Ps 145:9; cf. also vv. 15–16).¹³⁴ Third, God’s mercy is seen in His helping His people. For instance, Nehemiah notes God’s compassion toward Israel, particularly in His giving them judges (Neh 9:17–21, 27–32). Fourth, God’s mercy is seen in His fulfilling His electing purposes. Here God’s mercy is genuine but is also absolutely sovereign. As Paul says, God has mercy on whom He wills to have mercy (Rom 9:15–18).

Theological Clarifications of God’s Mercy

There is a theological difference between God’s mercy and His love, grace, and longsuffering. Mercy is the outworking of God’s love in the practical realm. Contrast this to love, which is, practically speaking, what God *is*. That is, mercy accentuates more what God *does* (though, technically, God can also be described *as* merciful). Paul speaks of God, who is rich in mercy *because* of His great love (Eph 2:4–6). Grace, then,

¹³⁴ The context suggests personal beings are meant here.

is God's attitude of favor toward the *guilty* (or lawbreakers). It operates in the *judicial* realm. Mercy is God's attitude of pity toward the *miserable* (or those in distress). It operates in the *practical* realm. Bavinck distinguishes mercy and grace. He similarly notes that mercy deals with misery, and that grace is juridical, having to do with "the verdict of death" (i.e., guilt).¹³⁵ John Piper makes similar distinctions, though his idea of grace involves the sinner, but not explicitly his guilt. Thus, he suggests that mercy and grace are intertwined: "Since sin always brings misery, and misery is always experienced by sinners, therefore all of God's acts of grace are also acts of mercy, and all his acts of mercy are also acts of grace."¹³⁶ While there is similarity between mercy and grace, one does wonder whether there is *that* close a connection or "intertwining" between the two.

Some theologians subsume longsuffering under the attribute of mercy, while others treat it separately. It is probably better to follow the former course, though recognizing that longsuffering is not quite synonymous with mercy. Specifically, longsuffering has the idea that God bears with the wicked and restrains their deserved punishment for a time (cf. "slow to anger," Num 14:8, et al.; from *'erek 'aph*, long in anger; cf. also the Gk.: *makrothumia*, long of anger).

Grace

God's grace is His underserved, unearned, unrecompensed, and, for unbelievers, unwanted favor toward mankind. It is God's condescending, judicial benevolence toward the deserved guilt of sinners. It, thus,

¹³⁵ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:213–14.

¹³⁶ *Future Grace* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1995), p. 77.

emphasizes the need for forgiveness (i.e., removal of guilt). Further, grace is not only shown to the undeserving but to the *ill*-deserving. In fact, grace acts without reference to desert at all. The principal Old Testament verb for grace is *chanan*, meaning *to show favor, be gracious* (the noun form is *chen*).¹³⁷ The principal New Testament word is *charis*.

The relationship between grace and the guilt of sin is amply demonstrated. Believers are described as those who received abundance of grace, particularly, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:17, 20). Paul shows this in another place, asking rhetorically, "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" (Rom 6:1). And, again, Paul describes believers as having received forgiveness of sins "according to the riches of His grace" (Eph 1:7).

Characteristics and Manifestations of God's Grace

Grace is depicted as both an attitude/disposition (Eph 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved") and a power/ability (God will pour out on the end time remnant of Israel the Holy Spirit in the capacity of efficacious, regenerating grace [*chen*] and the ability to make entreaties of repentance and faith which result in their calling on God in a national regeneration/rebirth, Zech 12:10; see also 2 Cor 12:9, "My grace is sufficient"). And, it is manifested in several ways. First, God's grace is manifested in justification, that is, in the action of being constituted and then declared righteous (Rom 3:23–24). Second, God's grace is manifested in regeneration, that is, in the impartation of spiritual life (Eph 2:8–9). Third, God's grace is manifested in the formation of the New Testament

¹³⁷ Some are inclined to see *chesed* (lovingkindness, covenant loyalty) and *racham* (to have mercy, pity) as basically synonymous with *chanan* (e.g., TWOT, s.v. "*chanan*," by Edwin Yamauchi, 1:303). However, I do see some differences between God's fidelity to His covenant, His feelings of pity for miserable people, and His condescending favor toward the guilty.

church (Eph 2:8; 3:7–8, “*the* gift of God’s grace . . . given to [Paul]”). The church is the brightest display of God’s grace, its greatest trophy. Fourth, God’s grace is shown in the sanctification of believers. Paul speaks of this to Titus, saying, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny all ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12). Fifth, God’s grace is manifested in His enabling believers to persevere in the Christian experience (Jas 4:6, “God gives grace to the humble”; 2 Cor 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness”). Sixth, and often overlooked, God’s grace is manifested in God’s deference to Himself. Hoeksema explains, saying, “Grace is that divine virtue according to which God is the perfection of all beauty and loveliness, and contemplates Himself as such with infinite delight.”¹³⁸

THE CHRISTLIKENESS OF GOD

Here it is helpful to briefly consider further the question, “What is God like?” and to give a rather unexpected answer, “Look at Jesus and see there what God is like.” At first this seems to be in reverse order. That is, normally Jesus is spoken of as like God and being very God Himself. However, there is great truth here, not often discussed by theologians.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 112. In a noteworthy discussion, Hoeksema demonstrates this idea from the usages of *chen* and *charis*, which depict pleasantness, gracefulness, and attractiveness (*Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 107–12). Cf. Lewis S. Chafer, “The Riches of Divine Grace,” *Systematic Theology*, 3:234–66.

¹³⁹ My own theology teacher, Alva J. McClain, taught this in his lectures in the 1950s and before (“The Doctrine of God”). The only other source I have seen that handles this subject is James E. McGoldrick, “The Christlikeness of God,” *Reformation and Revival* 7 (1998): 65–77.

Jesus is, though, the revealer of God *par excellence* because He is, after all, the one-for-one revelation of God.

- ♦ **John 1:18.** Jesus has “explained” the invisible God.
- ♦ **John 12:45.** Jesus says, “He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me.”
- ♦ **John 14:7.** Jesus says, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”
- ♦ **2 Corinthians 4:6 (cf. Exod 33:18–23).** The gospel gives “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”
- ♦ **Colossians 1:15; 2:9.** Paul says, “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God” and “for in [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”
- ♦ **Hebrews 1:3.** The author of Hebrews says, Christ is the “exact representation” of God’s nature.

Therefore, because of this exact representation, the question “What is God like?” can be answered in the following ways:

TEXT	EXPLANATION	CHARACTERISTIC
Matthew 9:35–36	Jesus is moved with compassion because the multitudes were as sheep with no shepherd.	God is compassionate.
Matthew 11:28–30	Jesus says, “Come unto Me. . . . I will give you rest.”	God is merciful and compassionate.

TEXT	EXPLANATION	CHARACTERISTIC
Matthew 23:25–33, 37	Jesus says, “Woe unto you Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites!”	God has confrontational wrath, denunciation, and judgment.
John 2:13–16	Jesus drives out the money-changers.	God exhibits holy anger and jealousy for that which is His.
John 8:1–11	Jesus responds to the woman caught in adultery.	God is kind, merciful, no respecter of persons, and does not judge outward appearances only; He exposes sin indiscriminately.
John 11:32–35, 43–44	Jesus weeps.	God is sympathetic, compassionate, angry at unbelief, and has power over death.
John 13:1–5	Jesus washes the disciples’ feet.	God has a servant’s spirit and cleanses away sin.
Revelation 1:12–18	John falls, trembling at Jesus’ feet.	God is worthy of worship and is awe-inspiring.

There are very practical values of the Christlikeness of God.¹⁴⁰ First, it takes God out of the abstract and philosophical realms. It enables one to see the attributes of God in a living, integrated relationship, not just as isolated attributes in a theology book. Second, it guards against unbalanced notions of who God is. That is, some emphasize God's love, His sovereignty, His power, or knowledge often to the exclusion of other attributes. Third, it gives assurance that one may genuinely know the only true and authentic God (1 John 5:20–21, "We are . . . in His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God"). In this respect, it was probably impossible for Old Testament saints to put together all the Scriptures and know precisely what God was like, as New Testament believers can.

¹⁴⁰ McClain, "The Doctrine of God."

Chapter 8

THE UNITY AND TRI-UNITY OF GOD

THE UNITY OF GOD

Theologians differ in their understanding and treatment of the unity of God. Many divide unity into two sections: (1) the uniqueness of God and (2) the numerical and identical unity of the essence of the Godhead. This treatment will develop the numerical unity under the heading of the “Unity of God,” having developed the basic idea of God’s uniqueness under the attribute of truth above.

The Meaning of the Unity of God

By the unity of God is meant that there is but one essence (the totality of God’s infinite perfections) in the Godhead, and this one essence wholly, equally, and eternally pervades each of the three persons of the Godhead without division or multiplication.¹ Fleshing this out a bit more, the unity of God means, first, that the whole essence of God is in each Trinitarian person. The essence is not divided among the persons of the Godhead. It can be wholly and indivisibility in more than one person. This is, after all, the claim of the doctrine of the simplicity of God, which asserts that God is incapable of division because He is the perfect Spirit. This means that a Trinitarian person is not a fractional

¹ See W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), esp. pp. 219–73.

part of the essence. This is in contrast to human essence or nature, for example. Human nature can subsist in more than one person, but not wholly and indivisibly. Each human being is part of humanity; in fact, a human person is an individual fraction of the essence of humanity, presently meaning that each human is about one six-billionth of all the essence. This is not the case with God where each person is all of the essence, not simply one-third of it.²

Second, the unity of God means that the essence is neither prior nor subsequent to the persons of the Godhead. The essence exists *only* as the persons of the Trinity; it exists only as trinalized. The one essence is *simultaneously* three persons, and it is so eternally. This is to say, God did not exist singly in essence for a time before becoming trinal. This also means that God will never cease to be three persons.

Third, the unity of God means that God is a *unity* not a *unit*. A unit is marked by a singleness, incapable of internal distinctions, whereas God is a unity of one essence in three distinct persons.

The Biblical Evidence for the Unity of God

The biblical material for the unity of God is intertwined with the material for the tri-unity of God, which will be discussed under the next major heading. So, unity cannot be fully understood without reflection on the other and vice versa. With this in mind, two lines of biblical thought will be traced out demonstrating the unity of God.

² Ibid., pp. 236–37.

Each is Recognized as God

The Father is God. Christ says concerning Himself: “For on Him the Father, God, has set His seal” (John 6:27). He later says in His post-resurrection ministry: “I ascend to My Father . . . and My God” (John 20:17). Further, believers have been chosen to salvation according to the foreknowledge of “God the Father” (1 Pet 1:2).

Jesus, the Son, is God. John declares that “the Word (*logos*) is God” (John 1:1; cf. v. 17). This concept of *word* goes back to the Old Testament idea of the revelation of God, fundamentally in deeds. Jesus is thus a revelation of God but also the revealed God. John also speaks of Jesus as “the only begotten God” (according to the older manuscripts, John 1:18). Paul refers to Him in his letter to Titus as “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). God the Father says of Jesus Christ, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Heb 1:8). And, in John’s first epistle, he writes that believers are “in His [i.e., God the Father’s] Son. This [Son] is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

The Holy Spirit is God. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God (Acts 5:3–4), demonstrating that the Spirit is God. Paul says, as well, that the local church is the temple of God because the Spirit of God dwells in it (1 Cor 3:16), again demonstrating that God and the Spirit of God are of the same essence.

All Are One God

The three persons of the holy Trinity are *one and the same God*.

The Father and Son are One

John notes that Jesus “was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18b). His meaning here is unmistakable,

evidenced by the fact that the Jewish religious leadership was “seeking all the more to kill Him” following this remark (John 5:18a). Later in John, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). The Jews again recognized the import of His claim and responded similarly, this time attempting to stone Him in mob violence (10:33).

This affirmation of oneness with God is explicated by Christ as a mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, as He says, “The Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:38; cf. also 14:10–11, 20; 17:21, 23). This mutual indwelling is sometimes called the *inbeing* of God or the *co-inherence* of the persons of the Trinity in the unity of the essence. As Shedd says, “This . . . is an unceasing circulation of the essence, whereby there is an eternal intercommunion and interaction of being in the Godhead, so that each person co-inheres in the others, and the others in each.”³ Jesus uses this idea of inbeing as an analogy of the unity that believers experience (John 17:21, 23), quite likely a reference to the spiritual solidarity between all believers and God and between each other as a result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that would come at Pentecost (1 Cor 12:13; Rom 12:5). Still, this is only an illustration; believers do not become one in essence with the Father and the Son. The inbeing for the believer is a judicial, spiritual bond between each believer, and all believers and God, only analogous with the identity of essence between the Father and the Son.

The Father and the Spirit are One

Paul spoke of the local church at Corinth as the temple of God (the Father) because the Spirit of God dwelled in the believers (1 Cor 3:16).

³ Ibid., p. 250.

The apostle also wrote that no one knows the thoughts of God (the Father) except the Spirit of God, which is a somewhat indirect claim that the Spirit is God (1 Cor 2:11).

The Son and the Spirit are One

In Romans 8:9, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ are used interchangeably, arguing for a unity of essence between the Son and the Spirit, if not also the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit.

The Father, Son, and Spirit are One

All three members of the Trinity indwell the believer. In one instance, Jesus promises that the *Spirit* of truth would be with the disciples forever (John 14:16). This presence is later explained as *Jesus'* coming to them (v. 18). Then, later, Jesus says that He and the *Father* would indwell the believer (v. 23). Again, while technically only the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, the whole Godhead, in some sense, indwells the believer as well, because of the unity of the essence in the three persons and their mutual inbeing.⁴

⁴ Another text which is sometimes appealed to is 1 John 5:7: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (KJV). This verse, however, does not appear in any non-suspect Greek manuscript or writer. Erasmus used it in his 3rd edition, though on suspicious grounds and only to later omit it in subsequent editions. Nevertheless, it was Erasmus's 3rd edition that was the fountainhead of the text of Stephanus (1550), whose 3rd edition Beza used heavily. And it was Beza's 3rd edition that was largely used by the translators of the KJV.

THE TRI-UNITY OF GOD

The tri-unity of God is one of the great fundamental doctrines concerning God. In fact, without the tri-unity of God, there could be no *incarnation* of God the Son. And, without the incarnation, there could be no *redemption* accomplished by the Son, nor could there be any *application* of the redemption by the Spirit.

The term *tri-unity* is actually more descriptive theologically than the word *trinity*. *Trinitarian* means three-fold or having three parts or aspects. *Tri-unity*, on the other hand, means three-in-one. In other words, God is *triune*, not *triple*; He is *three-in-one*, not *three-and-one*.

Further, the tri-unity of God means that the divine essence subsists wholly and indivisibly, simultaneously and eternally in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three persons in one essence. The tendency in theology has been either to deny the personal distinctions in the Godhead (a basic Unitarianism) or to hold to three gods (tri-theism).

The Old Testament Evidence for the Tri-Unity of God

The evidence of God's tri-unity from the Old Testament is more suggestive and inferential than direct, particularly the idea of a fully-developed *Trinitarianism*, for which the scant evidence itself is merely suggestive of a *plurality* in the Godhead. For example, appeal is often made to the fact that *Elohim* is plural (e.g., Gen 1:1, et al.), which, it is claimed, is a disguised reference to the Trinity (or at least a plurality).⁵ Victor

⁵ John MacArthur, for instance, reflects this when he says that *Elohim*, with its plural suffix (*im*), "presents a singular God who is expressed as a plurality" (*God: Coming Face to Face with His Majesty* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993], p. 20); see also G. Charles Aalders, *Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1:70.

Hamilton more cautiously says, however, that the best understanding “approaches the Trinitarian understanding and employs less direct terminology.”⁶ While it is true that *Elohim* is a plural noun, it seems best to explain this usage as one of majesty or intensity, not plurality.⁷

Abraham’s servant, on one occasion, calls Abraham “master” using the plural form, and something similar happens in Isaiah 1:3. However, in neither case does the term refer to numerical plurals. Similarly, in Genesis 1:26, God determines to create man in “Our” image. Here, the plural pronoun is best understood as simply agreeing with its referent, *Elohim*, which is plural in form. Allen Ross’s conclusion is helpful: “These plurals [in Gen 1:26] do not explicitly refer to the triunity of the Godhead but do allow for that doctrine’s development through the process of progressive revelation.”⁸

Another suggestive bit of evidence is the Old Testament texts that apply the name of God to more than one person in the same text. These too, however, fall short of demonstrating the actual tri-unity of God. For instance, David says in Psalm 110:1, “*Yahweh* says to my *Adonai*: Sit at My right hand.” Jesus Himself appeals to this text to refute the apostate leaders of His day who refused to believe in His deity (Matt 22:41–46). To these, His question is, “What do you think about the Christ, whose Son is He?” When they reply correctly that the Messiah was the son of David, Jesus then asks why David called the Messiah his *Adonai*. His point is that David’s Son is David’s God, a clear claim to His own deity. Jesus’

⁶ *The Book of Genesis 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 134.

⁷ Cf. Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 105. Derek Kidner prefers to call *Elohim* the “plural of fullness” (*Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* [London: Tyndale, 1967], p. 52).

⁸ *Creation and Blessing*, p. 112. Millard Erickson essentially agrees, though his understanding is more strongly expressed (*Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], pp. 353–54).

affirmation also demonstrates that there are two discernable persons of deity in Psalm 110:1. Similarly, in Psalm 45:6–7, two individuals are called *Elohim*. The psalm is addressed to God, who has a throne and a scepter, and who has been, interestingly enough, anointed with joy and gladness by “your God.” The author of Hebrews makes clear that this is a reference to the persons of God the Father and God the Son.

Similarly, there are a handful of texts which seem to imply *three* members of the Godhead, though without the New Testament these would not explicitly denote three persons in one and the same essence. For instance, Isaiah 48:16 speaks of the *Lord God*, His *Spirit*, and *Me* (Messiah). Likewise, Isaiah 61:1 says, “The *Spirit* of the *Lord* is upon *Me*.” Both are clearly Trinitarian only in light of further revelation.

Various theologians point to other Old Testament intimations of the tri-unity of God. For instance, Erickson observes that “once the basic concept of threeness in oneness was arrived at, indication of this nature of God were found in many places.”⁹ He gives examples of the three men who came to Abraham in Genesis 18 and the trisagion (“holy, holy, holy”) of Isaiah 6. He also suggests that the Hebrew idea of the “extended personality” shows that the Old Testament revelation allows the Trinitarian concept.¹⁰ The examples above of Isaiah 48:16 and 61:1 are, at best, compatible with Trinitarianism; however, the examples Erickson suggests from Genesis 18 and Isaiah 6 are extremely remote, and the idea of “extended personality” is likewise a dubious foundation for Trinitarianism.

⁹ *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–66.

Granted, the Old Testament does speak of God, the Spirit of God, and the Angel of Yahweh. And, Christians rightfully see three persons here. Still, it is doubtful if the Old Testament individual saw these as three distinct persons in one essence in a tri-personal God. To them, the Spirit of God, was God *within* men; the Angel was God *among* men. The Spirit of God was God Himself actively working. In fact, the parallelism between God's Spirit and God's presence in Psalm 139:7 seems to support the idea that the Spirit was considered equal to God's personal presence: "Where can I go from *Your Spirit*? Or where can I flee from *Your presence*?" In short, the Spirit of God from the Old Testament standpoint was somewhat analogous to the spirit of man, which was understood as the person thinking, willing, and doing. In this regard, Strong probably sums up best the conclusions able to be drawn from the Old Testament intimations for the tri-unity of God: "While they do not by themselves furnish a sufficient basis for the doctrine of the trinity, they contain the germ of it, and may be used in confirmation of it when its truth is substantially proved from the New Testament."¹¹

¹¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 322. Eugene Merrill, in arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity can be discerned implicitly in the Genesis narrative of creation, follows Geerhardus Vos in his acorn-to-the-oak-tree analogy of the biblical revelation of the tri-unity of God in the Old and New Testaments (see Vos, *Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], pp. 15–17). Merrill draws this conclusion based on the dubious reasoning that the nature of progressive revelation demands that revelational fundamentals must be found in the earliest biblical revelation. His statement is that "theological truth as central as that of the essence and nature of God himself is part and parcel of a developmental process that has its origins at the beginning of revelation itself and its culmination in revelation's final witness" ("Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Implied in the Genesis Creation Account?" in *The Genesis Debate*, ed. Ronald F. Youngblood [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], p. 115). While his premise is dubious, his conclusion is helpful: "One must not confuse the full-blown New Testament teaching of the Trinity with what is only *nascently* and *implicitly* [emphasis added] in the Old Testament" (p. 116), and "at least one must say as a Christian interpreter that the notion of a triune God exists potentially [emphasis added] in the Old Testament whether it would be recognizable as such without the subsequent New Testament revelation" (p. 117).

From another angle, Alvin Plantinga plausibly proposes that the Old Testament concepts of Word, Wisdom, and Spirit are preparatory for New Testament Trinitarianism. His conclusion is that these words "produce a hospitable atmosphere for New Testament recognition of distinct hypostases, or even persons, in God" (*ISBE*, rev. ed., s.v. "Trinity," 4:914–15).

In the end, it is, again, doubtful if the Old Testament saint entertained any true Trinitarian notions at all, as he heard and read the revelation of God. For various reasons, God stressed His uniqueness (unicity and absoluteness) in the Old Testament, among which are the following two: (1) the polytheism of the pagan world and the apparent difficulty, if not inability, of man at that stage in God's dealings to comprehend Trinitarianism correctly, and (2) the revelation in *words* of God as trinal had to await His revelation in *deeds*, that is, the historical manifestations of the Son in Bethlehem and the Spirit at Pentecost.

The New Testament Evidence for the Tri-Unity of God

There are several lines of evidence where the tri-unity of God is presented and explained in the New Testament.¹²

Numerous Texts

First, Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism presents Jesus, coming up out of the water, the Father, whose voice comes out of heaven, and the Spirit, who descends in the form of a dove (3:16–17). Second, when the angel announces Jesus' birth to Mary, the angel speaks of the Lord God (Luke 1:32), the Son of the Most High (v. 32, or the Son of God, v. 35), and the Holy Spirit (v. 35). Third, Trinitarian allusions are made in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Matthew references the "Lord . . . God" (Matt 4:7, 10); Jesus, or the Son of God (assumed in vv. 3, 6); and the Holy Spirit (v. 1).¹³ Fourth, the formula pronounced at Christian

¹² For excellent material, see Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, pp. 175–92.

¹³ Satan's attempt to kill Jesus in Matthew 2:13 demonstrates that he was not simply assuming Jesus' deity for the sake of argument here.

baptism plainly declares the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, explicitly teaching Trinitarianism (Matt 28:19). Fifth, the so-called Apostolic Benediction invokes the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God (the Father) and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Sixth, the New Testament makes personal distinctions in the Godhead, such as the distinction of the Father from the Son (John 3:16; 5:26; Gal 4:4) and the distinction of the Father and Son from the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17; 15:26).

In addition to these texts, there are numerous others supporting the tri-unity of God. Paul says, for instance, that “through Him [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18). A bit later, Paul refers to the “one Spirit . . . one Lord . . . [and] one God and Father” (Eph 4:4–6). Peter speaks of the alien believers, scattered throughout Asia Minor, as being chosen to salvation “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:2). In another place, Paul speaks of the “varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . varieties of ministries, and the same Lord . . . varieties of effects, but the same God [the Father]” (1 Cor 12:4–6). Again, Paul says that personal election to salvation is accomplished by the choice of God the Father, the love of the Lord, and the sanctification by the Spirit (2 Thess 2:13). The author of Hebrews similarly speaks of the final expiation for sin as accomplished by the blood of the Son, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself to God the Father (Heb 9:14). Jude commands that believers, “praying in the Holy Spirit, keep [themselves] in the love of God [the Father], waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life” (vv. 20–21). Finally, John pronounces grace and peace to the seven churches from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: “From Him who was and who is and who is to come,

and the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:4–5).

The Objectivity of the Three Persons to Each Other

Another line of evidence for the Trinity in the New Testament is the observation that the three persons of the Godhead are objective to each other.¹⁴ For instance, the Father loves the Son (John 3:35). This text does not speak of the Father loving the Father or of the Son loving the Son in the same way that John speaks of the Father dwelling in the Son and the Son dwelling in the Father (John 14:10–11). In another place, the Son is said to suffer at the will of the Father, not vice versa (Zech 13:7). Also in several places, the Father addresses the Son (cf. Luke 3:22; Heb 1:6), whereas the Son is said to be the way to the Father (John 14:6) and the one who glorifies the Father (John 17:5). Further, the Father is said to send the Spirit in the name of the Son (John 14:26), and He is said to reward the Son (Heb 2:9). Each of these specifically designates actions done by distinct persons.

What is more, each of the Trinitarian persons can say “I” and be addressed as “You,” further showing that the persons are objective to each other. Jesus, praying on the night in which He was betrayed, says “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself” (John 17:5). Likewise, the Holy Spirit tells the church at Antioch, “Set apart for Me Barnabas

¹⁴ This objectivity means that a Trinitarian Person includes all that is in the *unity* of God but not all that is in the *trinity* of God. Each does not possess the personal peculiarities of the other two Persons (cf. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 237). The Godhead is not one person who is a father, son, and spirit such as a seminarian may be a father, student and employee. Rather, the Trinity is three persons, not one person in three modes. Further, the actions of one Trinitarian person cannot be ascribed to another, even though all three persons participate in the activity.

and Saul” (Acts 13:2). And the Father says, concerning the Son, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You” (Heb 1:5).¹⁵

Trinitarian Consciousness

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons independently and irrespectively of creation, redemption, and sanctification. That is to say, the Son is never conscious that He is the Father or the Spirit, and the other persons are likewise conscious only of being the persons that they are in the one essence of the Godhead. As Shedd notes, “If God had never created the universe, but had existed alone from all eternity, He would be triune. And the three persons are so real and distinct from each other that each possesses a *hypostatical* or Trinitarian consciousness different from that of the others.”¹⁶

The Equality in Being, Power, and Glory

As shown, each person of the Godhead is called God, which is a proof of equality as well as unity. In addition, the Trinitarian persons are associated in ways denoting equality, as seen in the Baptismal Formula (Matt 28:19) and the Apostolic Benediction (2 Cor 13:14). One cannot simply put in an apostle’s name, an angel’s name, a great king’s name, or the name of the President of the United States without totally disrupting the obvious equality of the three persons in the Formula and Benediction.

¹⁵ Various heresies have arisen that deny the three distinct persons of the Godhead. For instance, the heresy of Patripassionism (the “Father suffers”) posited that God could not be three persons. Rather, the Son was actually the Father appearing in human form; that is, it was actually the Father who became man, suffered and died on the cross. Another similar theory is Monarchianism, which, as taught by Sabellius, posited a modal trinity wherein the Father was manifested as the Son and the Spirit; these were not distinct personalities but were manifestations of one person with the different titles of Father, Son, and Spirit—one single, non-trinal essence. This view, along with Sabellius, was condemned in A.D. 263. (For a concise treatment, see *EDT*, s.v. “Monarchianism,” by C. A. Blaising, pp. 784–85).

¹⁶ *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 237.

This equality is further seen in that there is no standard numerical order in the association of the persons of the Godhead. One order is Father, Spirit, and Son (2 Thess 2:13–14; 1 Pet 1:2–3; Rev 1:4–5). Another order is Spirit, Son, and Father (Eph 4:4–6; 5:18–20; 1 Cor 12:4–6). Another is Spirit, Father, and Son (Jude 20, 21). There is Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt 28:19). And, finally, there is Son, Father, and Spirit (2 Cor 13:14).

Further, the name “Son of God” does not denote inequality between the Father and the Son. Rather, the term *son* denotes the Hebrew idea of partaking in the qualities of whatever one is said to be a son (cf. “sons of thunder,” in Mark 3:17). Therefore, the term *son of God* denotes equality and identity of essence, which means Jesus partakes of the qualities of God—He *is* God; He *is* deity. This is demonstrated in a number of places, one of which is Jesus’ statement that the Father “has given all judgment to the Son so that all will honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23).

The Functional Difference between the Three Persons

The Bible indicates a certain priority or subordination pattern in the Trinity which has to do with *function* only and not with *essence*. As Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest put it, this subordination is “official,” not “essential.”¹⁷ It specifically concerns what the members of the triune God do in their offices, not what they *are* in their essence. Theologians refer to this personal relationship as the *Economic Trinity*, having to do with the distribution of activity and administrative order, as opposed

¹⁷ *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:275–79.

to the *Ontological Trinity*, which has to do with the very essence or being of God.

In the administration and activity of the Godhead, the Father is first, the Son is second, and the Spirit is third. The Father is the source, the Son is the channel, and the Spirit is the active agent in the Godhead. This order is seen in various prepositions, such as in 1 Corinthians 8:6, “One God the Father from (*ek*) whom are all things . . . one Lord Jesus Christ through (*dia*) whom are all things” and Ephesians 2:18, “For through (*dia*) Him [the Son] we both have our access by (*en*) one Spirit to (*pros*) the Father.”

In the administration and activity of the Godhead, the Son is subordinate to the Father and the Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son. This functional order is given in various texts. For instance, John speaks of (1) the Father’s sending the Son (1 John 4:10) and the Spirit (John 14:26); (2) of the Father’s being greater than the Son (John 14:28); and (3) of the Son’s sending the Spirit (John 14:26). And, Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God *and* the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9). These relationships are further described by other texts.

THE FATHER’S PRIMACY OVER THE SPIRIT

The believers have the Spirit from God	1 Corinthians 6:19
God sent forth the Spirit of His Son	Galatians 4:6

THE FATHER'S PRIMACY OVER THE SON

God sent His own Son	Romans 8:3
God is the head of the Son	1 Corinthians 11:3
The Son will deliver up the Kingdom to the Father	1 Corinthians 15:24
The Son emptied Himself to do the Father's redemptive will.	Philippians 2:7

Excursus: The Eternal Generation of the Son and the Eternal Procession of the Spirit

The distinctions between the Persons within the essence of the Godhead and the distinctions between their respective duties and work are explained theologically by the eternal generation of the Son by the Father and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son.

Proof of Generation and Procession

By the eternal generation of the Son is meant that eternal act whereby the Father *communicates* or *makes common* the divine essence to the Son—the eternal *sonning* of the Son. A. A. Hodge explains, eternal generation is

an eternal personal act of the Father, wherein, by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, he generates the person (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating

to him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead, without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of his Father's person, and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father, and the Father in the Son.¹⁸

The essence is indivisible and cannot be divided into three persons; it can only be "made common," not divided or parceled out to individual personalities, so that the whole of the divine essence (the unity) is in each of the three personalities (the trinity).

Eternal generation is founded upon three lines of evidence. First, eternal generation is based on the idea of the Son's being "born" or "begotten" of the Father. As John says, "He who was born of God [i.e., Christ] keeps him [i.e., the believer], and the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18). In another place, God proclaims to His Son, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You" (Ps 2:7; cf. Heb 1:5; 5:5; Acts 13:33). Second, eternal generation is also based on the theological meaning and implications of God as the "Father" of Jesus (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3, 17; Col 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3; Rev 1:6). Third, eternal generation, as well, grows out of the theological meaning and implications of Jesus as the "Son" (Rom 8:3, 32; 2 John 3).

Similar to eternal generation, procession refers to that eternal act whereby the Father and the Son make the divine essence common to the Spirit—the eternal *spirating* of the Spirit. Hodge again explains, the eternal procession of the Spirit is "the relation which the third person sustains to the first and second, wherein by an eternal and necessary, i.e., not voluntary, act of the Father and the Son, their whole identical divine

¹⁸ *Outlines of Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 182.

essence, without alienation, division, or change, is communicated to the Holy Ghost."¹⁹

Jesus refers to this procession, saying, "The Helper . . . who proceeds (present tense) from the Father" (John 15:26). Technically, this verse may refer to the temporal mission of the Spirit, that is, His special ministry on earth beginning at Pentecost. But, the assumption "which links the inner relation to the temporal mission is the belief that God reveals himself to us as he is in himself."²⁰ This is to say that the external, temporal mission of the Spirit is predicated on the internal distinctions of the Trinity, which in the case of the Spirit goes back to His eternal procession from the Father and the Son.

While John 15:26 only mentions the Father as the One from whom the Spirit proceeds, other texts support the idea that He also proceeds from the Son. In fact, John 15:26, when read in light of John 14:26 ("the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in *My* name"), bears this out. Thus, *both* the Father and the Son send the Spirit. The Father sends the Spirit *in Christ's name*. Other texts agree. For instance, Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of the Son" (Gal 4:6), "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9) and "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:19). These can be construed as genitives of source, in the sense of procession *from* the Son.

Theology of Generation and Procession

Eternal generation and procession describe the theological processes whereby the eternal, undivided essence of God subsists wholly, indivisibly, simultaneously, and eternally in Father, Son and Holy

¹⁹ *Outlines of Theology*, p. 189.

²⁰ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 160.

Spirit. The Father generates the Son and together with the Son spirates the Spirit. It is always in that order theologically. Both generation and procession constitute an eternal, divine act. Herman Bavinck explains, in comments specifically about the Son but equally true of the Spirit, “We must, accordingly conceive that generation as being eternal in the true sense of the word. It is not something that was completed and finished at some point in eternity, but an eternal unchanging act of God at once always complete and eternally ongoing.”²¹ Neither generation nor procession implies an inequality of essence; to the contrary, both teach and indicate just the opposite.

The doctrines of eternal generation and procession also account theologically for the three individual persons in the Godhead and for their evident administrative and functional order. It explains the relations and activities within the one, undivided, all-pervading, unceasingly circulating common essence or deity, relative to matters both internal and external to the Godhead.

The internal activity is the eternal trinalizing of the essence or the resultant Trinitarian distinctions of the First, Second, and Third Persons. The First Person is the Father, the ingenerate paternal subsistence of the divine essence. The Second Person is the Son, so called because the divine essence is made common to Him by generation/filiation. The Third Person is the Spirit, so called because the divine essence is made common to Him by spiration/procession.²²

As for the external activity, it refers to the transitive work of the Trinity via the functional order of the economy existing between the

²¹ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–), 2:310.

²² All three persons, in fact, were spirit beings in the eternal past, but the Holy Spirit is so designated in the special sense of spiration/procession.

three Trinitarian persons. The Father does not generate some of His own fatherhood or His personal paternity to the Son, nor do the Father and Son do so for the Spirit. However, it is still the *person* of the Father, not the essence, which generates the person of the Son (not essence). Shedd here speaks of three “forms” of God.²³ The divine essence subsists in Paternal form (Father), in Filial form (Son) and in Spirated form (Holy Spirit). All three persons issue from the essence of deity; therefore, all are equally and eternally God in the *Ontological Trinity* (i.e., having to do with being or essence). But the eternal generation of the Son by the Father and the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son form the structure of the *Economic Trinity* (having to do with function).²⁴

Both generation and procession are *eternal* acts. There is no thought of origin, nor any notion of temporal succession. It is an eternally simultaneous action by which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit subsist as co-equal, consubstantial, and co-eternal persons of the triune God. There is never any thought of one member existing previously to the others, nor of one ever being non-existent. Neither is there any idea that the *relationships* within the Godhead of Father, Son, and Spirit have been anything but eternal (e.g., that at some point the Second Person became the Son).

²³ *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 234. Strong calls them “modes” of subsistence (*Systematic Theology*, p. 343).

²⁴ C. Samuel Storms puts this clearly, saying, “(1) The Father generates the Son *as Son*, but not *as God*. The Son derives ‘sonship’ from the Father, but not deity. In respect to deity, the Son is God in Himself (autotheos). . . . (2) The Father and Son are they from whom the Spirit proceeds *as Spirit*, but not *as God*. The Spirit derives His ‘spirituality’ (for lack of a better term) from the Father and the Son, but not deity. In respect to deity, the Spirit is God in Himself (autotheos)” (*The Grandeur of God* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], p. 55). Heinrich Heppé adds to this, saying that another God was not created, made, or caused to emerge in generation/procession, but another *person* is made to share the common deity. The personal relation between the Father and the Son in the undivided essence is what issues from eternal generation (*Reformed Dogmatics* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], p. 119). In other words, the Son is always of the Father; the Father is never of the Son, nor is the Son of the Spirit. The Spirit is of the Father and Son, never vice versa.

Finally, eternal generation and procession are both *necessary* with the triune God. That is, God exists necessarily; He exists from Himself (i.e., self-existent). Quite evidently, God must then exist trinally. He does not do so simply voluntarily or as a result of a decree or a resolve of will, as such. It is a property of God's being to exist trinally in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not to say that He does not do so willingly, however, for He does not exist as He does by any external necessity. But, rather, He exists trinally, according to these eternal/procession doctrines.

Eternal Generation and the Son's Begottenness

Begotten translates *monogenes*, a word which Murray J. Harris helpfully shows refers to *derivation* or *descent* and not simply to *birth*. He argues this based on other compound adjectives ending *genes* and shows that *monogenes* specifically denotes "sole descent" or *without siblings*, referring to the only child in the family.²⁵ And, from this familial, personal application of *monogenes* comes the non-personal idea of unique or the only one of its kind.²⁶ Jesus' status as the begotten Son (John 3:16) or the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14) carries both the ideas of descent and uniqueness. As the One of sole descent from the Father, Jesus is of the same essence as the Father. And, because of this, Jesus is God's *unique* Son, a sonship distinct from God's other "sons," such as Christians (Rom 8:14; Heb 2:10), angels (Job 30:7), the nation Israel (Hos 11:1), and the Davidic king (2 Sam 7:14).

²⁵ *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 84. Cf. Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38. The author of Hebrews (Heb 11:17) calls Isaac Abraham's only begotten son because Isaac is the only son of Abraham and Sarah *by promise* (Gen 21:12). In that sense, Isaac is unique and without siblings, even though Ishmael had already been born to Abraham by Hagar and Abraham had later sons by Keturah.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Harris helpfully fills this out a bit more, saying,

The connotations that *monogenes* derives from Johannine usage greatly enrich the epithet or title. In the Johannine corpus, Jesus is *monogenes* because (1) he alone is *huios theou*, being of 'sole descent.' No one can call him brother. As in the First Epistle of John, so in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus alone is *huios theou* while believers are *tekna theou* (*huioi theou* does not occur). This distinction might be expressed in a non-Johannine idiom by saying that Christ's sonship is essential, that of believers is adoptive. (2) He is "unique" (a) in relation to the Father, because of (i) both before and after his incarnation he was in the most intimate fellowship with his father (1:18), (ii) he was the sole and matchless Revealer of the Father's love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9), and (iii) his origin is traceable to God the Father (John 1:14; cf. 1 John 5:18); and (b) in relation to human beings, because he is the object of human faith, the means of eternal salvation, and the touchstone of divine judgment (John 3:16, 18).²⁷

While connotations of generation/descent in the theological sense inhere in the word *monogenes*, the whole question of eternal generation cannot be answered simply by an appeal to this one word, nor does the doctrine ultimately rest on this word. As Lewis and Demarest say, "An only

²⁷ *Jesus as God*, p. 87.

son is also begotten!”²⁸ That is, it is implied in the Father-Son relationship. Therefore, they prefer the idea of “uniquely begotten” for *monogenes*.²⁹

To be sure, many reject any notions of generation in the word *monogenes*. Or, if any such ideas are entertained, they are predicated of Jesus’ humanity only.³⁰ This, however, seems too restrictive since the term is used with reference to Jesus *as a person*, not simply to His human nature.

One text that poses a challenge, however, to the view proposed here is John 1:18. In this text, John says, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” The older manuscript evidence favors “only begotten God” (*monogenes theos*), instead of “only begotten Son” (KJV, NKJV). If the former reading is correct, it would then seem to be a problem for those who restrict *monogenes* to uniqueness. That is, to say that Jesus is the unique God would sound a little strange in context (the unique “God . . . in the bosom of the Father”). God and Father are usually not, if ever, so juxtaposed when referring to the two Persons in the Godhead. Nor would it seem that unique here would be a fitting translation, unless one could posit the ideas of unicity or absoluteness for *monogenes* (i.e., “one and only,” as in Judg 11:34 [LXX]; Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38). While in a certain restrictive sense Jesus is the only God—and so are the Spirit and the Father—the idea of absoluteness is usually predicated of God in the broader, triune sense (Deut 6:4; Isa 44:6, 8; 45:21; John 5:44) and not only of the Son.

²⁸ *Integrative Theology*, 1:276.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:277.

³⁰ Cf. Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), p. 202.

Nevertheless, conservative commentators are unanimous at least on the fact that *monogenes theos* here refers ultimately to the deity of Christ. For instance, Harris translates the expression as “the only Son who is God.”³¹ Theologically, however, the connection between the divine essence of Christ and His sonship is eternal generation, the eternal *sonning* of the Son.

JESUS AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Jesus was conscious of the Fatherhood of God in a way that differs significantly from ordinary human beings. He understood that God was His Father in a unique sense, and this was manifested early in His life. As He says on one occasion, “Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” It was *His* Father’s house in a narrow, unique sense, although it was also the house of the covenant community in a larger sense (Luke 2:4). On another occasion, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God” (John 20:17). It can be argued, as well, that Jesus’ unique consciousness of His Father is the basis for similar statements made later by His apostles. For instance, Paul says that Jesus is God’s “own Son” (Rom 8:3, 32; seemingly carrying the force of *monogenes*). Also the phrase “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is used several times in the New Testament (cf. Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; Col 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3). Finally, John notes that Christ “has made us to be a kingdom, priests to *His* God and Father” (Rev 1:6).

³¹ *Jesus As God*, p. 92.

Eternal Generation and Eternal Sonship

For reasons given shortly, the sonship of the Second Person is eternal. Some, however, feel that there was a time when He became the Son.³² One such view is the *pre-creation view*. Proponents of this view suggest that while Christ existed in eternity past, He was not the Son until sometime before creation. Bernard Northrup, who holds this view, says,

The term [sonship] only applies after the latter Person [Christ] became subordinate in will and activities by choice in order to do the work that had been planned between the eternities. . . . Before His subordination to the Father as a result of the decree [in Ps 2:7], there was perfect equality in every relationship between the members of the Godhead. . . . At some unknown point in the past, apparently before the creation of anything, He took the subordinate position which He would maintain throughout all of His work between the eternities.³³

Another such view is the *incarnation view*. This view posits that Christ was a Person from eternity past, but He was not the Son until the incarnation. This is based chiefly on linguistic data that suggests that Jesus was not called the Son until after He came to earth. A recent proponent of this was John MacArthur, although he has subsequently changed his position.³⁴

³² For various views, see John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), pp. 38–42.

³³ *Finding Christ in the Psalms* (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1976), p. 22.

³⁴ “Re-examining the Eternal Sonship of Christ,” n.p. [cited 26 October 2007]. Online: http://www.bannerofttruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?683.

A third such view is the *baptism view*. This view connects sonship with the messianic office of Christ. At this baptism, which began His messianic ministry, God says, "This is My beloved Son," which is taken as an allusion to Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, or both.³⁵ Robert Reymond points out, however, that the phrase "You are My Son" goes beyond messianic implications to include "a preexistent *personal* relationship to God that preceded His messiahship and that served as the basis of both it and that self-understanding of His as 'the Son' found in such passages as Matthew 11:27; Mark 14:61–62; and Luke 20:13."³⁶

Finally, a fourth such view is the *resurrection view*. Paul's alleged connection of Psalm 2:7 with Jesus' resurrection in Acts 13:33 suggests to some that sonship and the resurrection are somehow coordinate. However, "raised" in this text could just as well be a reference to His being brought into the world or His First Advent (cf. Acts 3:22, 26; 7:37; et al.).³⁷

None of these views, however, is correct, all denying in one way or another the *eternal* sonship of Jesus Christ.

ETERNAL SONSHIP: BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Sonship has to do with essence and person, not ministry, self-humiliation, or some calendar event.³⁸ More particularly, sonship has to do with a *relationship* as Persons within the divine essence. That is, the

³⁵ EDT, s.v. "Baptism of Jesus," by R. W. Lyon, p. 136.

³⁶ *Jesus Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990), p. 50.

³⁷ For a good discussion of this text, see David M. Doran, "The Use of Psalm 2:7 in Acts 13:33" (unpublished paper presented in postgraduate seminar, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Allen Park MI, 6 April 1988).

³⁸ An excellent, though brief, handling of this topic is George Zeller and Renald Showers, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1993).

Son is what He is vis-à-vis the Father and vice versa. The Spirit is what He is because of His relationship to the Father and the Son. Sonship is not something that came upon Jesus at some temporal point, previous to which He did not possess it.³⁹ The options are rather *eternal* or *temporal*. Jesus is eternally the Son or temporally began to be the Son. There are no early-, mid-, or late-eternal way stations for the adoption of sonship.

That Jesus' pre-existence in the Godhead was in a Father-Son relationship seems to be the point of Luke 20:13, "And the owner of the vineyard [a reference to the Father] said, '... I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him'" (cf. also 3:22). That is, the Son is the Son prior to the sending. Similarly, in the parable in Matthew 21:37, the landowner (representing the Father) sent his son (representing Christ), suggesting that Christ's sonship was antecedent to His (temporal) messiahship. Other texts which speak of God sending the Son also suggest that sonship precedes the sending (John 3:16–17; Gal 4:4; Rom 8:3; 1 John 4:9, 10, 14).

The inter-Trinitarian relationships must of necessity be co-extensive. If but one of the persons is eternal, then all must be. If the Spirit is eternal (Heb 9:14) and the Father is eternal (Rom 16:26; 1 Cor 8:6; Acts 1:7; John 17:5; 5:26; 6:37), then the Son must also be. Furthermore, since the Son's filiation is so because of the (eternal) Father's (eternal) paternity, that filiation must of rigorous theological necessity be eternal. It is quite evident that a denial of eternal sonship is tantamount to a denial of the eternity of the person.

³⁹ In fact, it is meaningless to talk about some *point* in eternity or in some pre-creation sphere since all *beginnings, points, or assumptions-of-previously-held relationships* began with the original creation.

Also, the mutual knowledge between the Father and the Son (Matt 11:27) would also necessarily be eternal. This knowledge, by definition, must be intrinsic to each person, exhaustless, infinite and reciprocal.⁴⁰ If the Son's *knowledge* of the Father is eternal, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the *Son* is eternal.

Finally, since the functional order in the Trinity (i.e., the Economic Trinity) was in operation at the original creation, then sonship is eternal. The internal activity of the Trinity (the eternal trinalizing of the essence) precedes their external activity (their transitive work in the temporal sphere via the functional order of economy). The external, temporal work of God began at the creation of the universe.

Eternal Generation: Connotations of the Word *Generation* and Psalm 2:7

Eternal generation is somewhat of a metaphorical, anthropomorphic expression, akin to references to God's eyes, ears, arms, hands, and face. Many, if not most, of the connotations of a human father and son are not applicable to the theological (Trinitarian) ideas of Father and Son. For example, a human father is someone else's son, and a human son may also be someone else's father. Furthermore, all human father-son relationships need the participation of a third party—a woman. That being the case, no such ideas are suggested or even possible in the doctrine of eternal generation. The Father is unbegotten (i.e., does not have the personal property of filiation), and the Son never begets (i.e., does not have the personal property of paternity).

⁴⁰ Reymond, *Jesus Divine Messiah*, p. 72.

Finally, as briefly noted above, Psalm 2:7 raises a bit of a problem. The text says, “I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.’” The New Testament references this verse, both through quotation and allusion, and connects it to Jesus Christ. Because of this, this verse has been used to establish the eternal generation of the Son. This is a common interpretation among the older theologians. While not being the conscious intent of the psalmist, the thoughts and implications of eternal generation cannot be ruled out, at least not from a theological or technical standpoint.

There is, however, disagreement over the nature and intent of the Psalm. Questions arise, such as: (1) Is the Psalm referring to David? (2) Does it refer to a generic descendent of David’s, who is being crowned king of the theocracy? (3) Is it a purely messianic prophecy? (4) Or does it refer to David *and* ideally to a future Davidide messiah? It is generally agreed that the ultimate referent of the Son is the Messiah, since the New Testament quotations and allusions make this connection. (How much of this prospective thrust was understood at the time of writing is another issue, dealt with in other works.) It seems clear that this is an inauguration scene, the establishment of the theocratic king in Zion. In this respect, the messianic kingdom is, then, being inaugurated in this context. “Today” probably refers to the assumption of kingship, so that there is no need to extrapolate the event back into eternity. Further, this does not necessarily imply that sonship, as such, was bestowed or assumed on inauguration day. As S. Herbert Bess argues, the *hiphil* of *yālad* (beget) could be declarative in force, rather than causative.⁴¹ If correct, this is the best way to take the verb and to understand the use of

⁴¹ “The Term ‘Son of God’ in Light of Old Testament Idiom,” *GITJ* 6 (1965): 21–23.

this passage in the New Testament: The Messiah is being *declared* the Son of God on inauguration day for His kingdom.

This “decree” authorizing the assumption of kingship likely traces back to 2 Samuel 7:14–16, the formal statement of the Davidic covenant, which is the basis and foundation of the dynastic element of the messianic kingdom. The dynastic rights (e.g., heirship to the throne, the right to rule, etc.) to the theocracy were permanently attached to the house of David via the Davidic covenant. These rights devolved upon the Messiah from both Joseph and Mary. From Mary, He received His human nature, thus giving Him a genuine connection with the human race in general and the royal blood of David in particular. And from Joseph, He apparently received the legal title to the throne of David. In fact, both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David (Luke 3:31; Matt 1:6).

Theologically, the begetting of the Son is, as has been shown, eternal. Practically, however, in this Psalm, the begetting takes on a declarative, demonstrative, or confirmatory notion (per Bess). Again, sonship, theologically speaking, must be construed as an already-existing condition at the messianic assumption of kingship. It is especially, then, in this light that the New Testament references to Psalm 2:7 are to be understood. In these contexts, sonship is not simply messiahship but an already existing condition that is the ultimate basis for messiahship. Therefore, instead of sonship being bestowed, assumed, or caused, these New Testament references more properly highlight its being declared, attested to, or demonstrated (cf. Luke 3:22; Matt 16:5 [cf. 2 Pet 1:17]; Heb 1:5; 5:5). Again, Acts 13:33 could on the surface appear to refer to Jesus’ resurrection; however, as stated above “raised” in this text could just as well be a reference to His being brought into the world, that is, His First Advent (cf. Acts 3:22, 26; 7:37; et al.).

Eternal Procession and the Filioque Controversy

Filioque means “and from the Son.” The Eastern Church denied that the Son was also involved in the procession of the Holy Spirit. A clause asserting the opposite was added to the Nicene Creed at the Council of Toledo in 589. This *filioque clause* then became the main doctrinal issue in the split between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054. (Interestingly, some did, however, take a middle position, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son.)

Chapter 9

GOD AND THE UNIVERSE

By *universe* is meant whatever is created, which encompasses everything that is not God.¹ It is not simply the material planet, although that is the central element in this particular subset of systematic theology. The universe is not confined to the *world* (*kosmos*) or *age* (*aion*), although, again, they too are included. A theological definition should then include all matter and material objects, all non-material objects, all animate and inanimate objects, all person and intelligent creatures, along with all time-space-mass relationships and exchanges of energy.

God's relationship to the universe can be incorporated under the following major heads:²

- ♦ **Predestination or Decree:** God *planned* the Universe.
- ♦ **Creation:** God *made* the Universe.
- ♦ **Preservation:** God *upholds* the Universe.
- ♦ **Providence:** God *controls* the Universe.

¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1917), p. 251.

² Alva J. McClain, "God and the World" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

PREDESTINATION: GOD PLANNED THE UNIVERSE

Initially, it is helpful to give an overview of the various terms used in the Old and New Testaments for both the action and idea of *predestination*.

OLD TESTAMENT WORDS

<i>Yatsar</i>	(v) To ordain; denotes prior determination	Ps 139:16; Isa 22:11; 37:26; 46:11
<i>Ya'ats</i>	(v) To decide, devise, plan, purpose	Isa 14:24b, 27; 19:12, 17; 23:9; Jer 49:20a; 50:45
<i>Etsab</i>	(n) Plan, advice, counsel	Pss 33:11; 107:11; Prov 19:21; Isa 5:19; 14:26; 19:17; 46:10, 11; Jer 32:19; 49:20; 50:45; Mic 4:12
<i>Chashab</i>	(v) To purpose, plan, intend	Gen 50:20; Jer 49:20b
<i>Machsbebeth</i>	(n) Device, plan, intention, thought	Ps 92:5; Isa 55:8; Jer 49:20; 51:29
<i>Nathan</i>	(v) To give, appoint, ordain	Jer 1:5

NEW TESTAMENT WORDS

<i>Horidzo</i>	(v) To determine, appoint, fix, set	Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 17:26, 31
<i>Prooridzo</i>	(v) To mark out beforehand, predestine	Acts 4:28; Rom 8:29, 30; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:5, 11
<i>Protithemai</i>	(v) To place or set before, plan, purpose	Rom 3:25; Eph 1:9
<i>Proetoimadzo</i>	(v) To prepare beforehand	Rom 9:23; Eph 2:10
<i>Tasso</i>	(v) To appoint, ordain, order, arrange, place in a certain order	Acts 22:10; Rom 13:1
<i>Prostasso</i>	(v) To determine, fix	Acts 17:26
<i>Proginosko</i>	(v) (1) To have previous knowledge; (2) to approve beforehand; set electing love upon beforehand; (3) to foreordain	(1) Acts 26:5; 2 Pet 3:17; ³ (2) Rom 8:29, 11:2; (3) 1 Pet 1:20
<i>Prognosis</i>	(n) Foreknowledge, equivalent to foreordination in the two passages in which it is used	Acts 2:23; 1 Pet 1:2
<i>Procheiridzomai</i>	(v) To appoint, select	Acts 3:20; 22:14
<i>Procheirotoneo</i>	(v) To appoint	Acts 10:41

³ Neither of these texts refers to God's knowledge. Rather both contexts suggest a human knower.

God's Decree: Definition and Delineation

A. H. Strong helpfully defines God's decrees as "that eternal plan by which God has rendered certain all the events of the universe, past, present, and future."⁴ Charles Hodge adds, "The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his own will, whereby for his own glory He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."⁵ Wayne Grudem takes a different course, talking rather about the will of God and making it an attribute of purpose; as such, He defines God's will as "that attribute of God whereby he approves and determines to bring about every action necessary for the existence of himself and all creation."⁶ Grudem's definition however is problematic in that it suggests that God wills *Himself*. God is, after all, self-existent, existing necessarily, not voluntarily. And, God's will seems also better understood as an aspect of personality, as it was discussed above (see "Freedom").

Singular

God has one all-inclusive and comprehensive purpose, plan, and will. (His decree to act is itself not the act, although, the actions of God agree with His determination, not to mention His actions cannot be technically separated from His decree.) This idea is amply supported in Scripture. For instance, Paul says that believers are "predestined according to [the singular] purpose [*prothesis*] [of Him] who works all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph 1:11). A little later, Paul speaks of this

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 353.

⁵ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960), 1:534.

⁶ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 72.

again, noting that God's eternal purpose (again, *prothesis*) is "carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:11). Still again, Paul speaks of this singular purpose, saying, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose [*prothesis*]" (Rom 8:28).

God has only one comprehensive will because He is the infinitely perfect being, and He has an infinitely perfect will. Therefore, even though, at times, there appears to be several decrees, the various decrees are really *one decree*, reducible to one purpose or plan. The appearance of several decrees are for human comprehension; as A. A. Hodge says, man cannot embrace in one act of intelligent comprehension an infinite number of events in all of their relations. He is forced to study them part by part, knowing full well, however, that no event is isolated.⁷

Further, God decreed only what He intended to do. Out of all the possibilities which He knew, He determined the actualities. What is more, no part of His overall purpose is independent of the other parts. Amazingly, to God, His decrees are one single act without succession or series. And, because God is timeless, in His mind the relationship between the various decrees is technically only logical. For example, the decree of man's creation is logically prior to the decree concerning his actions (i.e., sun must precede sunlight, and the like).

Freely Made

Not only is God's plan singular and, thus, comprehensive, but it is also freely made. For instance, God purposes all things in accordance with the counsel of His own will (Eph 1:11) and in harmony with

⁷ *Outlines of Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 204.

His own “good pleasure” (*eudokia*, Eph 1:9; Phil 2:13). In short, God does whatever He pleases (Pss 115:3; 135:6). This correlates with the attribute of God’s freedom which suggests that God is completely self-determined and His actions are voluntarily, not necessarily done. That is to say, God exists necessarily, but He acts without necessity. In this sense, He was free to create or not create. As Isaiah says, “Who has directed the Spirit [spirit, NRSV; mind, NIV, NET] of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?” (Isa 40:13–14; cf. Rom 11:34).

Eternal

God’s plan is also eternal, having been made in eternity. As such, in His plan, everything—from beginning to end—is eternally contemporaneous and simultaneous before Him, having no chronological succession. The events of time are the outworking of God’s purpose formed in eternity. And, while in their execution there is temporal succession, there was no such succession in their formation.

This characteristic of eternity is amply attested to in Scripture. For instance, Peter speaks of Christ as “foreknown *before the foundation of the world* but . . . appear[ing] in . . . [time] for the sake of [believers]” (1 Pet 1:20).⁸ Paul says in another place that the equality of Gentiles and Jews in the new dispensational body, the church, was in accord with God’s *eternal purpose* (Eph 3:11). Similarly, James explains Gentile inclusion in this new body as owing to God’s plan “*from long ago*” (Acts 15:18). Paul says that the believer’s predestination to salvation occurs “according to [God’s] own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus *from eternity*”

⁸ *Foreknown* translates the perfect, passive of *proginosko*, which is, in this case, a synonym of predestination.

(2 Tim 1:9). In Isaiah's judgment oracle concerning the "valley of vision" (apparently a reference to the geographical environs of Jerusalem), Israel is condemned for not "considering Him who *planned it long ago*" (Isa 22:11). Similarly, when Isaiah prophesies about Sennacherib's fate,⁹ he records God's saying, "*Long ago* I did it, *from ancient times* I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass" (Isa 37:26).

The eternal decree of God and its execution in time raises, again, the question of the timelessness of God. The biblical witness clearly suggests that God is a timeless person. Anything temporal is necessarily external to Him and, thus, has been created by Him. As such, temporality began at creation. Still, God also sustains and totally controls the minutest aspects of the temporal order, and therein lies the mystery of the timelessness of God. No human explanation is entirely satisfactory, and the answer rests completely with the ultimately incomprehensible God.¹⁰

Changeless

God's plan is also changeless. God has no alternate plans in case something goes wrong with His original plan. Change of purpose arises because of ignorance, lack of wisdom or power, or unfaithfulness to an original purpose. Of course, none of these is possible with God.

This too is supported in Scripture. For instance, Peter tells Israel that their Christ had been delivered up to be crucified by "the predetermined

⁹ This included God's decree that Sennacherib would not destroy Jerusalem, as Sennacherib had planned to do.

¹⁰ See Carl Henry's helpful discussion in *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), 5:235–85. For a contrasting perspective, see Ronald Nash's non-committal discussion in *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 73–83. Also see C. Samuel Storm, *The Grandeur of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 62–76. Storms opts for the idea that God does relate to time successively and that there is a past and a future to God's knowledge. Interestingly, Paul Helm argues for God's timelessness on the premise that God relates to both time and space in the same way. As such, since space is finite and God is, therefore, not in space, so also time is finite and, therefore, God is not in time either (*The Eternal God* [New York: Oxford, 1988]).

plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).¹¹ James affirms God’s immutability, from which may be inferred the immutability of His will (Jas 1:7). The psalmist says that “the counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (Ps 33:11). Isaiah records God’s determined will for Assyria: “The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, ‘Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned, so it will stand, to break Assyria in My land’” (Isa 24:24–25). Similarly, Isaiah records God’s assertion of supremacy over all other would-be gods, a supremacy centered in God’s knowledge and immutability: “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times those which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa 46:9–10).¹²

Universal

God’s plan comprehends all things (entities, actions, events, etc.) that come to pass, whether good or bad, righteous or sinful, necessary or contingent, humanly purposed or fortuitous. Nothing is outside of God’s purpose.¹³

¹¹ The adjective translated “predetermined” here is the perfect, passive participle of *horidzo*: “the having-been-fixed will.” The noun translated “foreknowledge” is *prognosei*, and it has, in the parallel construction here, an instrumental idea of foreordination or prearrangement. The will of God in sending Jesus was “fixed,” i.e., unchangeable.

¹² As mentioned in the discussion of God’s immutability, theologians raise objections to this idea. For instance, Clark Pinnock suggests that God has alternative plans in His mind: “God has the power and ability to be . . . an ‘ad hoc’ God, one who responds and adapts to surprises and to the unexpected. God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B” (“Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994], p. 113). Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. If “Plan B” should fail, then, I presume, God must also have a “Plan C” and so forth. What this actually postulates is the nonsensical and unbiblical notion of an infinite regression of alternative, purely contingent plans.

¹³ The only alternatives are caprice, sheer chance, cosmic necessity, or some form of philosophical dualism.

Paul explicitly grounds this conclusion, saying both that “*all* things . . . work together for good” for the called ones (Rom 8:28) and that “*all* things” occur according to “the counsel of [God’s] will” (Eph 1:11). Proverbs 16:4 asserts that *everything* has been made according to a divine purpose, even the day of evil (which day is probably not limited to final judgment but comprises any day of calamity, as well). The idea here is simply that everything has its God-appointed end or purpose, even evil. That is, while God decreed to permit wickedness, He also decreed to bring it to His appointed end of punishment. Everything without exception will be brought to the ultimate end God has designed.

Scripture indicates the all-encompassing will of God in several ways, among which are the following eight:

1. **The stability of the material universe.** The earth stands because of God’s ordinances; all things are His servants (Ps 119:89–91).
2. **The rise and fall of rulers.** God determines the appointed times of nations, including their ongoing affairs, their beginning and end, their stages of development and balance of power, even their geographical boundaries (Acts 17:26). In short, the powers that exist are established (*tasso*, perfect passive participle) by God (Rom 13:1).
3. **The length of one’s life.** Man’s days “are determined [fixed: *charatz*], the number of his months is with [God], and his limits [God] has set so that he cannot pass” (Job 14:5). No human will live one millisecond longer than God’s decree has determined (cf.

Jesus' "hour" in John 7:30 and each man's God-appointed death in Heb 9:27).¹⁴

4. **The circumstances of each one's life and death.** James counsels that believers should pray "if the Lord wills" they will live and accomplish various proposals (Jas 4:13). And John records Jesus' statement to Peter indicating "by what kind of death [Peter] would glorify God" (John 21:19).
5. **The free acts of human beings.** The good acts of believers are predestined by God; Paul notes that they are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand (*proetoimadzo*) that we would walk in them" (Eph 2:10). Isaiah records God's promise that Cyrus would "perform all [God's] desire," though Cyrus would not even be born for another 150 years. Likewise, God predestines all men's evil acts as well. For instance, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was one of the worst and most evil miscarriages of justice in human history, yet it occurred precisely according to God's plan (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23). Importantly, the believers in Acts look back to the cross with this commentary: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:27–28). Joseph similarly says that his brothers' sin against him was intended for evil, but God intended

¹⁴ As noted above when discussing whether God changes His mind, Hezekiah's life extension presents a superficial problem, both for God's immutability and for this idea that God determines the limits for each one's life. However, as also noted, the promise that Hezekiah would "die and not live" must have come with the implicit condition that were he to beg for God's mercy, God would extend his life. Therefore, the statement about Hezekiah's ensuing death is really a statement about his own mortality were God not to intervene. In short, God decreed both the prayer and the extension of life that followed.

it for good (Gen 50:20). Jeremiah interprets the terrible calamity of the sack of Jerusalem saying, “The Lord has done what He purposed; He has accomplished His word which He commanded from days of old” (Lam 2:17). Similarly, Amos asks rhetorically: “If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?” (Amos 3:6). Paul too speaks of God’s hardening Israel in disobedience in order to bring Gentiles to the place of His favor (Rom 11:25–26). Similarly, in the eschatological Tribulation period, God will cause (“put it in their hearts”) the coalition of ten kings to execute His will, to give their kingdom to the Antichrist (Rev 17:17). In fact, the very idea of prophecy supports this fact that God predestines the free acts of men.

This raises its share of objections. For instance, David Basinger, an Arminian, denies God’s ultimate sovereignty by positing that man is significantly free. While he admits that God has some form of “veto power” over man’s freedom, he denies that God has what might be called significant sovereignty.¹⁵ As for God’s decrees, then, Arminians such as Basinger suggest that human free acts are not decreed by God, but are only known by Him, whereas Socinians traditionally suggest that these free acts are not even known by God. Broadly speaking, these indeterminists say that one is not free unless he could have done otherwise. To these, then, an act is free if it is not causally determined (called *contra-causal freedom*), which means that no causal explanation can

¹⁵ “The New Calvinism: A Sheep in Wolves’ Clothing,” *JT* 39 (1986): 490.

be given as to why the particular agent acted according to one reason rather than another.¹⁶

It is much better to say, however, that actions have causes and yet are still free, so long as the causation is non-constraining.¹⁷ This form of determinism implies "that for everything that ever happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen."¹⁸ A. A. Hodge agrees, saying that freedom does not demand "the liberty of indifference" where the will acts in a "state of perfect equilibrium independent of all motives for or against." Freedom, he asserts, is man's choosing or acting "according to the dispositions and desires of his heart, under the immediate view which his reason takes of the case."¹⁹ Robert Reymond describes the same thing as "liberty of spontaneity,"²⁰ and Augustine calls it "reasonable self-determination." All rightly argue for rational spontaneity in decision-making and volitional spontaneity in action. Another objection raised relates to God's culpability for determining evil. While this will be pursued below in the discussion of human responsibility and providence, here it is best to say, preliminarily, that God's decree in these instances is permissive in nature. Still, exactly *how* God *certainly* causes these

¹⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, too, struggles with accepting an "all comprehensive plan of God" (A. L. Baker, *Berkouwer's Doctrine of Election: Balance or Imbalance?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987], p. 115).

¹⁷ John S. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 20, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ *Outlines of Theology*, p. 210.

²⁰ *Preach the Word* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), p. 63.

acts is not known, leading W. G. T. Shedd to call this phenomenon an “inscrutable mystery.”²¹

6. **The salvation of believers.** This is actually the doctrine of election. Peter speaks of the scattered believers in Asia Minor as those who were chosen according to God’s *prognosis*. This word is usually translated *foreknowledge* and understood in the sense of prescience or advance knowledge. But, the word here seems to carry more the idea of *prearrangement* or *instrumentality*, a meaning similar to Paul’s description of believers as those predestined (*prooridzo*) to the adoption as sons (Eph 1:5; cf. Acts 2:23).
7. **The perdition of the ungodly.** Those who are offended and stumble because of Christ (i.e., the non-elect) are “disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed [*tithemi*, aorist, passive indicative]” (1 Pet 2:8; cf. Rom 11:28).
8. **Trivial matters.** Something as humanly fortuitous as the casting of the lot—in this case a revelatory vehicle—is decided by the Lord (Prov 16:33). Further, God plans and commands where lightning will strike (Job 36:32). God’s decree even extends to the death of animal creation and the hairs of one’s head (Matt 10:29–30).

Unconditional

God’s plan is unconditional (Eph 1:11). This means that “its execution does not depend upon anything that has not itself been decreed.”²² God’s decrees are not conditional in the sense that they are

²¹ *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), p. 321.

²² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:404.

suspended on a pure contingency or some indecision somewhere else. God's decree may rest on a *decreed* condition, but the whole plan and purpose of God is not contingent or conditional in any way; it is likewise independent of everything finite. Again, God's decrees rest on His own infinite perfections and good pleasure.²³ Therefore, if God waits on an undetermined condition to be fulfilled or not fulfilled, then His decrees are neither eternal nor immutable. In fact, if even just one event is left indeterminate—one speck of cosmic dust or raindrop or snowflake—all future events will be left in greater or lesser degrees of indetermination.²⁴ As A. A. Hodge contends, "No event is isolated; to make one certainly future implies the determination of the whole concatenation of causes and effects which constitute the universe."²⁵

The absolute and unconditional plan of God also incorporates the *means* to the desired ends, the causes as well as the effects. Whatever conditions, causes, or other factors are necessary to fulfill the decreed event are themselves decreed. This is the only theological answer to the efficacy of prayer, for example.²⁶ If God purposes to accomplish an end through the means of Christians praying to Him, then He decrees their prayers. As Ezekiel describes it, prayer is something God "permits" Israel and others to do (36:37–38) as a decreed means to accomplishing the purposes He has unconditionally decreed, ultimately for His,

²³ This unconditionality is predicated, as well, on God's eternity (independent of time), immutability (independent of finite vicissitudes), and omniscience, particularly His exhaustive foreknowledge. In this latter regard, Shedd is surely right when he says, "God cannot foreknow an event unless it is certain, and it cannot be certain if it ultimately depends on finite will" (*Dogmatic Theology*, p. 318; see also Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 356–58).

²⁴ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 205.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁶ See C. Samuel Storms, *Reaching God's Ear* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), pp. 128, 129, 272 and W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 47–65.

not men's (v. 32), "holy name" (vv. 20–23). Further, to fulfill God's purpose of atonement through Christ, Jesus was delivered up by the predetermined plan of God, a plan that entailed the means: nailed to the cross *by the hands of godless men* (Acts 2:23). Similarly, God's electing decree is accomplished "through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13).

In like manner, God's decree also includes the *results* of the decreed event or entity. The decree to create, for example, includes or comprehends within it all of the actual results. These results do not simply follow as some sort of undetermined consequence. If God decreed the law of gravity, then He determines when and where a sparrow will fall to the ground.²⁷

Certain

God's plan is certainly efficacious; in fact, predestination means to render *certain*. Therefore, there is no such thing as an undecreed event or an ultimately unfulfilled decree. This is true for two reasons. First, the perfection and faithfulness of God prohibit God's purposes from being unfulfilled and, thus, uncertain. Second, the universality of God's plan suggests that all things stand in a mutual, interlocking relationship. All historical events are bound up with God and His plan. If one event is certain, everything else is as well.

Isaiah speaks of this certain efficacy, saying, "For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it?" (Isa 14:27). Nebuchadnezzar's difficult experience teaches him that God "does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can

²⁷ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 356.

ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'" (Dan 4:23). Paul implies this too, telling the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia: "When they had carried out *all that was written* concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb" (Acts 11:39).

Preserves Human Responsibility

God's plan does not negate human responsibility. Predestination implies certainty, not pre-necessitation or compulsion. In fact, the Bible always maintains a theological distinction between certainty and compulsion. Man, therefore, makes decisions freely, without being constrained. And, as such, he remains responsible for what he does. In fact, "What makes a person 'responsible,'" Reymond notes, "is whether there is a lawgiver over him who has declared that he will give an accounting to the lawgiver for his thoughts, words, and actions."²⁸ He says further, "'Responsibility' has reference to the obligation to give a response or an account of one's actions to a lawgiver."²⁹

God's decrees are not addressed to creatures; they are not statute law. They lay no compulsion on the wills of men, prescribing simply what men *will* do, not what they *shall* do. The decrees determine the certainty of events, but they do not directly cause any event. This is why the decree of God is not known (in most cases) until *after* the fact.

Most theologians speak of two aspects of God's decrees (or will), and they do so variously: the permissive and directive (or efficacious) aspects, the desired and decreed aspects, or the revealed and secret

²⁸ *Preach the Word*, p. 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.* In this sense, God's sovereignty establishes, rather than subverts, human responsibility.

aspects.³⁰ This distinction helps to relieve some of the philosophical tension between the Bible's affirmation of God's sovereignty and man's freedom (e.g., Matt 18:7; Luke 22:22), although ultimately there is no rationally satisfactory explanation.³¹ In fact, this mystery will most likely remain such for finite beings, even in glory (Deut 29:29).

Still, this attempt to help understand the tension by distinguishing between these two aspects of God's will is helpful. God's directive will is carried out through physical or material causes (e.g., laws of gravity) and, sometimes, more immediate (though not necessarily miraculous) intervention (Phil 2:13, "It is God who is at work in you"). In His permissive will, God uses dependent free agents as means, taking the form either of (1) not hindering their sinful self-determination (Ps 106:15, "He gave them their request but sent a wasting disease among them") or (2) regulating and controlling the results of such determinations (Gen 50:20, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good").

Here too the issue of God's relation to human sinful acts is raised. Again, all that can be safely said is that God decrees *to permit* what He hates and abhors. Granted, what God permits, He still stands in relationship to. That is, permission does not entail lack of involvement. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest suggest that "Good things . . . are purposed with divine pleasure and enduement. Evil things are permitted with divine displeasure."³² In sum, that God can and does permit sin

³⁰ See Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 208; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 318–22; and R. L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 161.

³¹ Grudem speaks of these two aspects as God's *necessary* will (that which He must do according to His nature) and His *free* will (that which He chooses to do) (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 213–14). And, as noted already, Grudem makes God's willing an attribute of God and speaks of God's willing Himself. This, however, contradicts the assertion that God is uncaused and self-existent *necessarily*, not volitionally or voluntarily.

³² *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:237.

and misery is quite evident since these things actually exist. In fact, if God foreordained the crucifixion of Jesus, then somehow He can foreordain sin.³³

Centered in Jesus Christ

God's plan is made and accomplished in relation to Jesus Christ. By Christ, God made the world (lit. ages, *aionas*—all time-space-mass relationships and exchanges of energy, Heb 1:2). Paul notes that the union of Jews and Gentiles on a plane of equality in the body of Christ was "in accordance with [God's] eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:11). He earlier connects God's predestined plan and purpose in salvation to Christ, speaking of believers as "chosen in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). "In [*en*] Him" here probably means something like "in connection with Him," akin to the phrase in the next verse where Paul says, God predestined us "through Jesus Christ" (v. 5). Similarly, in v. 9, Paul speaks of God's kind intention toward believers "which He [God] purposed in Him [Christ]." And, in v. 10, Paul speaks of the future dispensation (i.e., the Kingdom) when God will sum up all things "in Christ."³⁴

Concerns God's Actions, not Person

God's plan relates to His actions and not to His nature. God decrees only those things outside of Himself (i.e., the universe and whatever

³³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:547. Again, the whys and wherefores are simply left untouched by Scripture's authors. It is evident that an agent is not responsible for all of the certain consequences of his acts. For instance, a just judge may arouse intense feelings of bitterness and hatred when he sentences someone, but he is not blameworthy. In the final analysis, to delve beyond what is written is not only futile, but borders on the heretical (Rom 9:20, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?").

³⁴ It is doubtful if the "in Him" relationship here means union with Christ positionally via Spirit baptism.

comes to pass therein). He does not decree to be holy, to exist in three persons, or anything else intrinsic to His nature. These things are necessary, not voluntary attributes.³⁵

Directed toward God's Glory

God's all-comprehensive plan has for its final purpose God's own glory. Everything about God, not least His will, is self-referring. There is, after all, no greater standard to meet and no higher person to please than Himself. He affirms this through Isaiah, saying, "For My Own sake, for My own sake, I will act . . . and My glory I will not give to another" (Isa 48:11; cf. 42:8).

God's Decree: Further Problems and Objections

Again, how does a holy God create evil, as both Isaiah ("[God] create[s] evil," 45:7 [KJV]) and Amos ("Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" 3:6 [KJV]) affirm? While a few lines of response have been sketched above, here it is also helpful to note that the Hebrew word translated *evil* (*ra'*) is more appropriately rendered *calamity* (NASB) or *disaster* (NIV). That is, it refers to physical evil, which is entirely different from moral evil.

Further, it may also be objected that predestination is a bit too harsh a thought and that, perhaps, foreknowledge would be more intellectually palatable. This suggestion, however, is unworkable since God's foreknowledge rests on His predestined decrees. He knows actualities as certainties ahead of their occurrence precisely because

³⁵ Again, contra Grudem (*Systematic Theology*, p. 214).

He has predestined them. In other words, He foreknows only what is certain. So this suggestion merely shifts the problem a little and does not actually solve anything.

Even further, as has also been noted above, some suggest that predestination kills or militates against human effort. Here a few lines of further response and review are helpful. First, human effort (and *all* means) is included in the decree. This was established already. In this regard, predestination demands and dignifies human participation, not destroys it. For instance, it is God's purpose to bring the elect to salvation through the gospel. Thus, He has predestined human participation in witnessing. He has purposed to answer prayer in response to human need and has ordained those prayers in order to accomplish His purpose.

Second, there is a sense that the stronger the hope of success, the stronger will be the motive to exert effort.³⁶ During Paul's journey to Rome, God guaranteed (decreed) that there would be no loss of life from the impending shipwreck and that Paul would go to Rome and stand before Caesar. So Paul urged the greatest human participation possible, when the ship grounded and fell apart (Acts 27:22, 24, 43, 44). Furthermore, in the matter of the true believer's progressive sanctification and inevitable perseverance, it is "God who is at work in [him], both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). With that sure incentive, the Christian is then to "work out" his salvation in continuing faith and good works (Phil 2:12).

³⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:548.

Third, God's decrees are not addressed to men and are usually unknown until *after* the event.³⁷ So how could they legitimately destroy human effort?

Fourth, God's decree is not the same thing as fatalism. This is so for four reasons. First, fatalism has no *final* causes in view; rather, it is blind necessity with no ends or goals. Second, fatalism is controlled by unintelligent factors and causes. Third, fatalism has no place for free acts and causes because all is *necessary*. And, fourth, fatalism has no morality and no moral distinctions.

God's Decree: Three Aspects

In the discussion of human responsibility, two aspects of God's will were suggested. Here it is helpful to fill in that discussion with a few more ideas about each and to include a third aspect.

First, there is the secretive aspect of God's will. This encompasses whatever comes to pass and is not usually known until after the fact. Several texts address this. For instance, Moses says that "the secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Deut 29:29). The three Hebrews respond to Nebuchadnezzar's threats of an impending fiery death, saying, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *even if He does not . . .*" (Dan 3:17). This secretive aspect is seen as well in James's admonition to preface all human plans with "if the Lord wills" (Jas 4:15). As to the "stumbling blocks" (offences [KJV]),³⁸ Jesus said that it was *inevitable* ("as

³⁷ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 363.

³⁸ A "stumbling block" (*scandalon*) is of an Old Testament derivation, coming from the verb *cashal*: to stumble, stagger or totter; the hiphil stem suggests "cause to stumble" (BDB, s.v. *cashal*, p. 505). As such, it is an incentive to commit sin, tantamount in many

has been decreed" [NIV]; "is part of God's plan" [NLT]; "as it has been determined," [NET]) that they occur (i.e., the secret will of God, Luke 22:22). The preceptive will of God, however, was for that person not to disobey ("Woe to that man through whom they come," Matt 18:7).

The only proper response to this aspect of the will of God is acceptance in loyal resignation. Jesus exemplifies this response in His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Demonstrating His genuine and total humanity, Jesus expresses a bit of uncertainty about the secret will of God for the immediate future (as far as His human consciousness is concerned): "If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." But His voluntary resignation is, "not as I will, but as You will" (Matt 26:38–39).

Second, there is the preceptive aspect of God's will. This has to do with Scripture's commands, precepts and exhortations. In this regard, a very high percentage of what a Christian ought to do is not secretive but rather is readily found in the Word of God. This is, then, the counterpart to the secretive aspect of God's will. In this category belong "the things revealed . . . to us and to our sons forever" (Deut 29:29). In other words, it is always God's will that believers be progressively sanctified and avoid, for instance, moral impurity (1 Thess 4:3). This aspect requires simple obedience.

Third, and very much related to the previous aspect, is the unspecified aspect of God's will. This relates to God's desire for specific moral decisions not precisely addressed in Scripture. Paul expresses this idea in when he speaks of "trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Eph 5:10). This aspect of God's will requires biblical *wisdom* and *guidance*,

cases to apostasy itself, being a word for idols (Zeph 1:3; cf. Matt 13:41). In Matthew 18:7 and Luke 22:22 it demonstrates that the secret will of God may call for His permission of free agents to sin and thus fulfill a higher dimension of God's total plan.

which come through meditation on God's precepts and ways (Ps 119:15) along with hating every false way (Ps 119:128).

In surveying these three aspects, it is clear that the first delineates what *will* happen. And, the second and third delineate what morally *should* happen (from the perspective of human responsibility) but may or may not, depending on the details of the secret will, which decrees what actually and certainly does happen.

CREATION: GOD MADE THE UNIVERSE

Strong defines the original creation as “that free act of the triune God by which in the beginning for his own glory he made, without the use of preexisting materials, the whole visible and invisible universe.”³⁹ An even better definition, however, is given by Herman Hoeksema. He says, “Creation . . . may be defined as that act of the almighty will of God whereby He gave to the things that were eternally in His counsel existence in distinction from Himself.”⁴⁰ This creation has several components, among which are the following.

The Universe at One Point had no Existence

There was a time when the universe—all that is not God—had no existence; there was, in this sense, a *before*. In fact, the eternal (timeless), self-contained Trinity had no external manifestations or outside activity

³⁹ *Systematic Theology*, p. 371.

⁴⁰ *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), p. 171. This definition has distinct overtones of Herman Bavinck's (see *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–], 2:416).

of any sort until the beginning of time with the opening fiat of the creative week. In highly anthropomorphic language, Moses indicates that there was a state of affairs before the mountains were “born” and before the earth had a “birth” (Ps 90:2). Jesus likewise affirms this when He recalls the glory He had with the Father “before the world was” and the love He enjoyed from the Father “before the foundation of the world” (John 17:5, 24). Predestination (pre-temporal election) to eternal life occurred “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4).

The Universe was Created at a Definite Point

Numerous further texts refer to the beginning and foundation of the world (i.e., universe). Moses recounts that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Most take this clause to be a heading to the creation account, but it seems better to understand it as the initial creative act of the universe, though somewhat in the rough and to be followed by succeeding creative acts. John, referring to the same creative event, speaks of the Christ, the Logos, as already existing when God created “in the beginning” (John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word”).⁴¹ Many other texts refer to the original creation as the “beginning” (Matt 19:4, 8; 24:21; Mark 10:6; 13:19; John 8:44; 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 1:10; 1 John 1:1; 2:13–14; 3:8; 2 Pet 3:4; Rev 3:14). And many others speak of the world’s “foundation” (2 Sam 22:16; Job 38:4; Pss 18:7, 15; 82:5; 104:5; Matt 25:34; Heb 4:3; Rev 13:8). Really the only other alternative to this idea is some notion of the eternity of matter, a theologically impossible and generally discredited idea. Millard Erickson is

⁴¹ The verb “was” (*ēimi*) is imperfect, denoting linear existence in past time.

quite right in observing that “[God] did not fashion and adapt something that already existed independently of him.”⁴²

Further, creation is all-inclusive. As noted, *universe* includes all that is not God. All reality is created; and all was created at the original creation described in Genesis 1. The Bible plainly asserts that “all things” (*ta panta*)—everything that ever had, has, or will have being or existence—ultimately stem from the creative work of God (John 1:3; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16; Rev 4:11). These “things” include the heavens, earth, seas, and all that is in them (Acts 4:24; 14:5; 17:24; Rev 10:6). In this regard, there is no such thing as “being in general,” or independent, brute, free-floating being. All ontology is predicated on the creative activity of God, the eternal, infinite being.

The Universe was Created by the Triune God

All three members of the Godhead are said to participate in creation. The relationship of the three persons in this activity is explained by the concept, discussed above, of the Economic Trinity. That is, there is a certain order of function in the work of the triune God. God the Father was the originator of creation, as Paul says: “There is but one God from (*ek*) whom are all things” (1 Cor 8:6). God the son was the mediator of creation, the superintendent that stood between God, the Owner/Architect, and the Spirit, the hard-hat executor. John affirms this, saying that “all things came into being through (*dia*)” the Son (John 1:3; cf. v. 17). Paul reiterates this when he says, there is “one Lord, Jesus Christ, by (*dia*) whom are all things” (1 Cor 8:6). And, the Spirit, as noted, is

⁴² *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 394.

the executor of creation. After reporting the divine act of Genesis 1:1, Moses follows this with three circumstantial clauses in the next verse, describing the result of that act. One such result was the moving or hovering of the Spirit over the earth, which, at that time, was covered with water and shrouded in darkness (v. 2). The idea seems to be that the Spirit was awaiting the next command from God (through the Son) in creation. Further, Elihu says that “the Spirit of the Lord has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). While referring specifically to himself, the statement can, by extension, refer to all human beings and, indeed, to all things. If God is the Creator of human beings, He cannot be denied the same role for everything else in the universe.⁴³

The Universe was Created Freely As a Result of God's Will and Wisdom and for His Glory

As Strong rightly says, “Creation is not an instinctive or necessary process of the divine nature, but is the free act of a rational will, put forth for a definite and sufficient end.”⁴⁴ David says that “the heavens are telling of the glory of God and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps 19:1). Jeremiah relates that God “made the earth by His power, . . . established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding . . . stretched out the heavens” (Jer 10:12).

⁴³ Some also cite Psalm 104:30, “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; You renew the face of the ground.” This verse, however, is probably not speaking of origins but is rather addressing the concept of secondary causation (i.e., rain) or preservation, as the last clause indicates.

⁴⁴ *Systematic Theology*, p. 373.

Further Characteristics of the Created Universe

The Universe was Created Supernaturally and Instantaneously

The formula repeatedly found in Genesis 1 affirms this: “Let there be . . . and it was so” (vv. 3, 6, 9, et al.). Theologically, creation was accomplished without the use of preexisting materials. It was accomplished *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).⁴⁵ There was no evolutionary process in creation. Man has no animal ancestry and the universe as a whole has no history of any kind prior to the opening creative act, recounted in Genesis 1:1. There was no original creation (i.e., the “gap theory”), previous to the present creation, which was destroyed by sin. In other words, Genesis 1 does not describe a re-creation after an undefined period of time, as some suggest.⁴⁶ This idea has been soundly refuted in other places.⁴⁷

The Universe was Created in Six Days

Creation was accomplished in six, successive, 24-hour days. It is true that the word *day* (*yom*) is used in a three-fold sense in Genesis 1–2: (1) It refers at times to a 12-hour period of daylight (1:5, 14, 16, 18), (2) generically to the entire creation week (2:4),⁴⁸ and (3) to a normal 24-

⁴⁵ Some dislike this term, e.g., Strong (*Systematic Theology*, p. 372).

⁴⁶ Some posit a gap before Genesis 1:1. See, e.g., Merrill Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), pp. 37–39; see also Bruce Waltke's overview “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 216–28. Others suggest a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. See, e.g., Arthur Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, ON: Doorway, 1970).

⁴⁷ See especially Westin Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976).

⁴⁸ Unless this refers to the initial creation of the earth “in the rough” on Day 1 (cf. Gen 1:1).

hour day. There are, however, several good biblical reasons for arguing for a creation week of six, successive, 24-hour days.⁴⁹

First, the numerical adjective before *day* (*yom*) limits its reference to a 24-hour day (i.e., *one* day, the *second* day, the *third* day, et al.). In fact, every time *day* is preceded by a numerical adjective in the Old Testament, a plausible case can be made for this meaning (cf. the *seventh* day of the week, the *fifteenth* day of the seventh month, et al.). Some do call these *solar days*, which invites the criticism of anachronism, since the sun was not created until Day 4 (Gen 1:16). This criticism is a bit pedantic, though, since there was a light source created for the rotating planet already on Day 1 because the earth went through a normal day/night cycle (Gen 1:5).

Second, the phrase “there was evening and there was morning” indicates a 24-hour day. In Daniel 8:14 the 2,300 “evenings and mornings” (Heb) is correctly translated “days,” which does not mean 1,150 days (nor simply long periods of time). Daniel gives the prophecy nearly four hundred years before the fact, and the 2,300 days refers to a period of over six years when the Jewish altar was in a state of defilement during the intertestamental period.

Therefore, it appears that there is something of a morning-to-morning reckoning of the 24-hour day in Genesis 1, and the interchange of light and darkness refers to a typical earth day. The evening terminates the daytime and the morning brings an end to the night. And, when morning is reached, the day is concluded.

⁴⁹ Some disagree, while others remain agnostic. For instance, Robert D. Culver makes a plea for agnosticism in creation matters in general; still, he seems certain that creation was *not* recent nor were the days of creation 24 hours each (*Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* [Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005], p. 161).

Third, the creation served as a pattern for man's work week. Sabbath observance under the Law of Moses was predicated on God's work of creation in six days and His rest on the seventh. Moses writes, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. . . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Exod 20:8–9, 11). The days of man's work week are directly related to the days of creation. The human week is patterned after the creative week. As such, the Jews were required to rest one day of 24 hours out of a week of 24-hour days.

Fourth, normal interpretive rules require a word be taken at face value unless there are compelling reasons not to (e.g., context or other Scripture). There are no such reasons in this text. Rather, the need for vast amounts of time beyond six, successive, 24-hour days of creation is dictated by a uniformitarian agenda (i.e., present processes are the key to the past) from outside the text. Such an agenda is simply not admissible.

Fifth, the heavenly bodies created on Day 4 were intended for, among other things, "days and years" (Gen 1:14). The days, in this case, must have been 24-hour days or the word *years* in the same text is meaningless.

Sixth, Adam and Eve's survival of Day 7 before being expelled from the Garden and seeing the earth cursed implies the days were normal in length; at least they could not have been ages-long without the text being unintelligible.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ A rather sophisticated interpretation of the days of creation is the "Framework Hypothesis," which Robert V. McCabe explains is a view which "argues that the creation 'week' itself is a figure, a literary framework, designed to present God's creative work in a topical, nonsequential manner, as opposed to a literal week comprised of sequential, literal days" ("A Critique of the Framework

The Universe was Created with Biological Boundaries

Organisms that can truly fertilize constitute what Moses describes as a “kind” (10x in Gen 1; e.g., Gen 1:11, 12, et al.). A kind is sometimes referred to as a *baramin*, from the Hebrew verb *bara* (to create) and *min* (from a kind). Appearances and morphology have no bearing in this classification. If fertilization is accomplished, there is the presence of a kind, even if the embryo cannot develop fully or the offspring is sterile. For example, the mule is of the horse-kind because it is the product (implying successful fertilization) of a horse and donkey, even though the mule is sterile. It is difficult to know where kind fits in the modern scale of taxonomy (i.e., kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species).

Impassible genetic boundaries of heredity are established by the Genesis kind. In fact, Mendel’s laws of heredity are predicated on this truth. There are no *missing links*; none are even possible. To be sure, great variation is possible within the kinds. This is true because of numerous possible genetic combinations. Furthermore, no new kinds have appeared since creation; rather, many have since become extinct, creating a zoologically-impooverished world in comparison with the original creation.

The Universe was Created with the Appearance of Age

The original creation had the appearance of age. For example, fruit trees were created as fully grown, bearing fruit that had seeds within (Gen 1:12). Animals were created mature (Gen 1:20–25), and Adam and Eve

Interpretation of the Creation Account [Part 2 of 2]” *DBSJ* 11 [2006]: 63). McCabe has exhaustively presented and refuted this theory. See his “A Critique of the Framework Interpretation of the Creation Account (Part 1 of 2),” *DBSJ* 10 (2005): 19–67 and “A Critique of the Framework Interpretation of the Creation Account (Part 2 of 2),” pp. 63–133.

were created as adults (Gen 1:26–30; 2:7, 20–25). It is even possible that stars were created with light already shining on the earth (Gen 1:15–17).

Erickson demurs, calling the creation with apparent age view the “ideal time theory” and dismissing it as a “genuinely novel and ingenious view.”⁵¹ However, it is difficult to see how he can call it new and ingenious when, by his own understanding, Adam had such an “ideal” age.⁵² In the end, Erickson’s objection amounts to little more than a quibble over *how long* the “ideal time” could possibly be. That is, it is apparently permissible for Adam to look a few decades older than he really was, but it is considered novel and ingenuous to extend the principle to a universe that by current uniformitarian presuppositions seems billions of years older than it actually is.

Erickson (and others) suggests that God would be an apparent deceiver if the original creation had an appearance of age.⁵³ But this assertion borders on the nonsensical since the Creator has told us in His Word that His creation was much younger than outward appearances might imply.

In short, rejection of creation with an appearance of age and of other biblical evidences for a contrary-to-appearances young earth (e.g., biblical catastrophism and flood geology) is all predicated on the philosophical need for vast amounts of time to be inserted into the biblical narrative, a need (again) based on an assumption of uniformitarianism. This unbiblical assumption then overrides biblical exegesis. This leads Erickson to end up positing a day-age view, which says that the days of

⁵¹ *Christian Theology*, p. 406.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

creation are actually indefinite periods of time.⁵⁴ Further, in addition to the day-age theory, Erickson embraces progressive creationism as the divine method of creation. In this view “God created in a series of acts over a long period of time. He created the first member of each ‘kind.’ . . . From that first member of the group, the others developed by evolution.”⁵⁵ Such a process, however, is not based on the testimony of the text.

The problems between the Bible and modern science are fundamentally hermeneutical. For Erickson and others, the Bible and science are to be harmonized according the “double-revelation” theory (see ch. 1, “Nature and Natural Theology”). Again, in this view God is said to have given two, equally-authoritative revelations, the Bible and nature, with the theologian and the scientist, respectively, as the experts of each. And, since Scripture, it is claimed, is *not* a “textbook on science,” the theologian must defer to the scientists in these matters. Thus, a recent, universal deluge “involves too great a strain on the geological evidence” and is accordingly rejected.⁵⁶ And, just as the Noahic Flood geology violates the uniformitarian consensus, so too does a 24-hour creation day. These days must be extended to whatever length required by the ruling consensus. Edward John Carnell says as much (and rather pompously): “Since orthodoxy has given up the literal-day theory out of respect for geology, it would certainly forfeit no principle if it gave up the immediate-creation theory out of respect for paleontology.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 409. Progressive creationism has been around a long time in evangelicalism, having been popularized by Bernard Ramm in *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 112–15, 256.

⁵⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 407.

⁵⁷ *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 95.

It is a poor hermeneutic which allows the extra-biblical and unbiblical assumptions of secular thought to trump biblical exegesis.

The Universe was Created Perfect

The original creation was perfect at the end of the six creative days. In fact, God pronounced His six-day old universe “very good” (Gen 1:31, *tob ma’odh*, lit. “exceedingly good”). Creation fully met the end for which it was made; God’s expectations for His six-day-old universe were totally fulfilled. This presupposes, then, that Lucifer had not fallen and death and disease had not entered the universe since sin had not yet entered the universe.

PRESERVATION: GOD SUSTAINS THE UNIVERSE

The Definition of Preservation

This discussion will make a distinction between preservation and providence, though such a distinction is not always made.⁵⁸ Preservation comprises two aspects: (1) protection of creation against harm and destruction and (2) provision for all creation’s needs.⁵⁹ A more adequate theological definition would be that preservation is the work of the triune

⁵⁸ For instance, the Westminster Shorter Catechism links preservation and providence, saying that providence is the preservation and government of all God’s creatures. Erickson, evidently following the Catechism, also treats preservation and providence together under the two heads: preservation and government (*Christian Theology*, pp. 414–30).

⁵⁹ Paul Helm provides a similar definition, saying, “To preserve is to keep in being or existence.” He, however, links this work with providence (*The Providence of God* [Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 1994], p. 22).

God, accomplished particularly through the Son, whereby He upholds the universe “with all its laws, properties, powers, and processes.”⁶⁰

This definition suggests, first, that creation cannot be self-sustaining. God maintains its existence, including human life. Second, it suggests that there is no continuous, divine, or creative activity ongoing. Such continuous creation would reduce all of God’s activity in the universe to miraculous, direct creation. Jonathan Edwards posits such continuous activity, saying,

God’s upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing, at each moment, because its existence at this moment is not merely in part from God, but wholly from Him; and not in any part, or degree, from its antecedent existence.⁶¹ This, however, is not the biblical testimony. Third, this definition suggests that God continued to work after He rested from His origin creative activity. The divine rest did not mean the cessation of all work thereafter. Rather, the text says that God “rested on the seventh day *from all His work which He had done*” (Gen 2:2). Jesus alludes to the Father’s continuing activity, saying, “My Father is working until now” (John 5:17).

The Proof of Preservation

Nehemiah, in his great prayer of confession, notes clearly that God gives life to all of the heavens, earth, seas, and all living things contained

⁶⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758), IV.3, quoted in Helm, *The Providence of God*, p. 86.

⁶¹ *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, IV.3, quoted in Helm, *The Providence of God*, pp. 85–86.

therein (Neh 9:6; cf. also Deut 33:27). Paul speaks of this in his charge to Timothy, appealing to God “who gives life to all things” (1 Tim 6:13). The author of Hebrews too picks up this theme in demonstrating the Son’s superiority over angels, saying, Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3).

God’s preservation is not physical in force, such as electricity. Instead, God works in and through material properties, like the human soul in the body. As Paul Helm notes, “This upholding, being metaphysical or ontological in character, is physically undetectable.”⁶² Strong speaks of preservation as God’s concurrence in all the operations of the universe.⁶³

The Specific Domains of Preservation

One specific area of divine preservation is the general stability of the universe. Paul speaks of Christ as the divinely-appointed sustainer, saying “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col 1:17).

A second area is the laws and processes of nature. Moses writes of God’s preservation as entailing a limited uniformitarianism, saying that “while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Gen 8:22). Similarly, the psalmist traces the constant renewing of the ground to God’s preserving work (Ps 104:19–22).

A third area is God’s preservation of human and animal life. The same psalmist describes God’s sending forth springs for the beasts, grass

⁶² *The Providence of God*, p. 89.

⁶³ *Systematic Theology*, p. 411.

for the cattle, vegetation for man, and food for the lions (Ps 104:10–12). David says plainly that “the Lord preserves man and beast” (Ps 36:6). Another psalmist similarly declares, God “keeps us in life” (Ps 66:9). Job likewise addresses God as the “watcher” or guardian (“preserver” [KJV]) of man (Job 7:20). And Paul declares to the Areopagus philosophers that “in [the true God] we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28). Other similar texts could be listed (Matt 6:24–26; 10:29, 31).

PROVIDENCE: GOD CONTROLS THE UNIVERSE

Providence is God’s power in bringing the movement of the universe to its predetermined goal and design. It is the effecting or the outworking of His decrees. Or, as McClain says, providence is “the exercise of divine care and foresight in providing for the world’s movement to a pre-determined goal.”⁶⁴ Strong similarly says that “providence is that continuous agency of God by which He makes all the events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design with which He created it.”⁶⁵ Strong also says that “providence is God’s attention concentrated everywhere.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “God and the World.”

⁶⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 419.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 420. Shedd notes that God works in providence as He does in preservation. And, He “does not violate in providence what he has established in creation” (*Dogmatic Theology*, p. 412). Otherwise there would be continuous miraculous activity.

Providence and Human Freedom

As has been noted already in discussing God's decree, God controls the free acts of men, both predestining them and providentially bringing them to pass. Scripture clearly implies this. For instance, David affirms that "Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power" (Ps 110:3). And the Proverbs assert that "the king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord" (21:1), that "the plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (16:1), and that "many plans are in a man's heart but the counsel [*'etsab*, purpose] of the Lord will stand" (19:21; 20:24). Moses also tells how the Lord caused the Egyptians to freely give their gold, silver, and clothing to the departing Israelites (Exod 12:36; 3:22).

Here, then, God's specific, providential control of human actions will be traced along four lines.⁶⁷ First, providence, at times, prevents human actions, notably illustrated in God's keeping Abimelech from sinning against Sarah (Gen 20:6). Second, at other times, providence permits human actions. The chronicler recounts that "God left [Hezekiah] alone" to see what was in his heart when the Babylonians inquired about the miracle of the sundial (2 Chron 2:31). In another place, the psalmist says that God gave Israel over "to the stubbornness of their heart to walk in their own devices" (Ps 81:12–13). Jesus asserts that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of human hearts (Matt 19:8). And, Paul speaks of God's permitting human rebellion to run its course (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). These instances do not imply that God ceases to be in control; rather, they simply suggest that God, at times, withholds His restraint.

⁶⁷ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 423–25.

In fact, this is probably precisely what is meant in the cases of God's hardening certain individuals (Exod 4:21; 7:3, 13, 22; Rom 9:18; 11:25; et al.). God's withdrawing of restraint or permitting allows the natural deteriorating effects of sin to be accelerated.

Third, providence is also directive. This is sometimes called God's *overruling providence*. For instance, God directs Joseph's brothers' evil acts for His good purposes (Gen 50:20). The psalmist says that "the wrath of man shall praise You" (76:10). Peter similarly says that God made the crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). To this Paul adds that God used this event to bring about the reconciliation of the world (Rom 11:13–15, 25).

Finally, providence is also determinative, particularly in the limits God places on evil. God gives Satan power over Job but only up to a point (Job 1:12; 2:6). God limits the destruction wrought on Israel by her enemies (Ps 124:1–3). And, God limits the severity of Christian temptation (1 Cor 10:13).

There are, generally speaking, four views of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. (1) *Indeterminism* suggests that God's decree is not ultimately sovereign or controlling. Subsequently, this view suggests that God's omniscience does not comprise comprehensive knowledge of the future. This view, however, is difficult to harmonize with Scripture. (2) *Middle-knowledge* suggests that God knows what a free person would actually or certainly do in any number of purely contingent situations. This view also denies God's omniscience in that it suggests God does not know the difference between a future possibility and a future certainty until the event transpires. (3) An *antinomic* view suggests that the relationship is simply paradoxical from a human perspective. This is an acceptable position in that nothing exists in man as it exists

in God. The Creator-creature distinction demands as correlative a dual perspective of the divine and the human. (4) *Compatibilism* (or the liberty of spontaneity) suggests that man's freedom is subservient to, not parallel with, God's freedom. Human freedom is, thus, compatible with divine sovereignty because God controls both. This also upholds the Creator-creature distinction and, accordingly, is a viable understanding.

Providence and Secondary Causation

God generally exercises control over the universe through secondary or indirect causation. The psalmist, for instance, speaks of fire, hail, snow, clouds, and strong winds "fulfilling [God's] word" (Ps 148:8). Of course, sometimes God has also used miracles to fulfill His plan. However, as previously stated, the universe is not being sustained with such. Further, providence is best understood in the realm of secondary causation and miracles in the area of immediate power.⁶⁸ In this sense, there are, technically speaking, no "miracles of providence" or "Grade B" miracles.

⁶⁸ Strong appears to confuse miracle and providence, which leads to his giving a rather naturalistic definition of miracle. He asserts that nature is "God's method of working" and "since nature is only the manifestation of God, special providence, miracle, and regeneration are simply different degrees of extraordinary nature" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 432). Shedd's definition of the miraculous is much better. He suggests that it involves (1) a suspension of natural law and (2) the imposition of supernatural power (*Dogmatic Theology*, 416–23). Storms concurs with Shedd, noting that a miracle is "a direct act of God independent of the otherwise natural order of cause and effect" (*Reaching God's Ear*, p. 272).

Part 4



ANGELOLOGY

Chapter 10

THE DOCTRINE OF ANGELS

Angels are mentioned in at least thirty-three books of the Bible. There are over one-hundred references in the Old Testament and one-hundred sixty in the New Testament, some of which are made by Christ Himself. The word *angel* in both the Old (*mala'ke*) and New (*angelos*) Testaments means *messenger*. And the word most often refers to a spirit being, as defined in systematic theology. But, there are a few usages that refer to humans in the role of a messenger (1 Kgs 19:2; Hag 1:13; Mal 2:7; Luke 7:24; 9:52; Rev 1:20).

Louis Berkhof notes that Scripture “makes no deliberate attempt to prove the existence of angels, but assumes them throughout, and in its historical books repeatedly shows us the angels in action. No one who bows before the authority of the Word of God can doubt the existence of angels.”¹ Fred Dickason agrees, adding, “The fact that angels exist is as certain as the fact that God exists.”²

Superstition regarding angels was rampant in the Middle Ages, especially in Roman Catholic theology. Not surprisingly, then, the Enlightenment introduced a major reaction. Considering the belief a hold-over from the polytheistic stage in man’s religious evolution, the new liberal thought came to regard the idea of angels as fantastic and in need of wholesale reinterpretation.³ Similar thinking prevails today, as some

¹ *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), p. 143.

² *Angels, Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 17. A concise but helpful source on angelology is by Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “The Agents of God: Angels,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), pp. 293–337.

³ *ISBE*, rev. ed., s.v. “Angel,” by G. W. Bromiley, 1:47.

suggest that the notion of angels as heavenly messengers “has its roots in the earlier pagan religions of the Near East.” El, Baal, Mot, Anath, and others all had angelic couriers who carried out their assigned missions. As such, angels are “simply folklorish survivals of the older, pagan deities, conveniently subordinated to the hegemony of Yahweh.”⁴

THE ORIGIN OF ANGELS

Created Beings

All angels are created beings. That is, they are finite and are a part of the created order, the universe (i.e., everything that is not God). The psalmist affirms this, saying, “For He commanded and they were created” (Ps 148:5), and, like all created beings, angles were designed to praise the Lord (Ps 148:2). Paul similarly affirms their created, subservient status, saying that neither angels “nor any other created thing” (Rom 8:39) can separate believers from God’s love in Christ. In another place, Paul likewise says that “all things were created” by Christ, “both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, dominions or rulers or authorities” (Col 1:16; cf. John 1:3), descriptions mainly of angelic organization (cf. Eph 6:12).

⁴ IDB, s.v. “Angel,” by T. H. Gaster, 1:129.

Created on Day One of Creation

The original creation took place in six, successive, 24-hour days. All time-space-mass phenomena and exchanges of energy began in the relatively recent creation-week of Genesis 1–2, including angels. Moses records that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” a statement best taken as a creative act itself, the first of such acts. Here God laid the foundation of the earth (Job 38:4), an event which the angels witnessed and celebrated with joyful singing: “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). The “morning stars” and the “sons of God” are set in parallel, and both refer to angels, since “sons of God” elsewhere in Job clearly refers to angels (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1).⁵ This means that angels must have been created just prior to the creation of the earth itself in Genesis 1:1, perhaps at the very opening of Day 1.⁶

Direct Creation

Each one of the myriads of angels was directly and individually created by God. As such, angels have no common nature which all share, nor any common stock from which all came. In fact, there is no kinship among the angels, no bond or connection to tie them together in any

⁵ The expression “sons of God” in Job refers to these directly created beings. Elsewhere Adam (Luke 3:38) and believers (Gal 3:26) are likewise called “sons of God.” The former is called such because he had a unique, individual creation while the latter have a direct, spiritual creation (“created in Christ Jesus,” Eph 2:10), one predicated upon individual repentance and belief. All of these “sons of God,” then, are directly created, in one way or another, independent of any common nature or genetic/racial character.

⁶ Renald Showers, in a slightly different and more elaborate discussion, puts the order as the creation of the heavens, the angels, and the earth (*Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels* [Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1997], p. 19). Berkhof simply says that the creation of angelic beings was before the seventh day of the creation week (*Systematic Theology*, p. 144).

familial manner. Jesus affirms this, saying, that “like angels in heaven,” in the resurrection state, people will “neither marry nor [be] given in marriage” (Matt 22:30). Whereas God created two of human kind and two of each animal kind—each complete with a self-replicating genetic system, He created angels without reference to kind. Therefore, without an act of direct creation, there can be no addition to the angelic host. What is more, the original number of angels that God created still exists, since the number has not increased through direct creation or decreased through the reduction of any angel to non-being.

Further, angels constitute a *company*, not a race.⁷ Therefore, there is no savior for those angels who sinned, nor will there be. Each angel would have to have his own individual sin-bearer if redemption were to take place. This, however, Jesus did not (and will not) do, as the author of Hebrews says, “Assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham [i.e., human beings like Himself]” (Heb 2:16). “Therefore,” this same author says, “He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). In short, only the sins of the human race were atoned for in the death of Christ.

⁷ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 447.

THE NATURE OF ANGELS

Personal Beings

Angels bear all the marks of personality whether one uses the paradigm of intellect, emotion, and will or that of self-consciousness and self-determination. Using the former, angels certainly have rationality, emotional ability, and volitional freedom or will. David, for instance, is described as having wisdom “like the wisdom of the angel of God” (2 Sam 14:20). Similarly, the many instances of angelic speech suggest this as well, since only personal, rational beings can use language (cf. Matt 1:20; 28:5). Further, demons (fallen angels) and angels are said to *know* certain things. They know the person of Christ, along with His power (Mark 1:24, 35; 5:7; Luke 4:34). Further, all demons know and affirm the existence of the one true God (Jas 2:19). Satan knows that at the mid-point of the Tribulation he has “only a short time” before being incarcerated for one thousand years (Rev 12:12). In another place, an angel forbids John from worshipping because he knows that worship belongs only to God (Rev 22:9).

Angels also possess genuine emotion. Angels are said to have shouted for joy at creation (Job 38:7) and at the announcement of Christ’s birth (Luke 2:13), and they are said to shout for joy at the repentance of wayward sinners (Luke 15:10). Further, demons not only affirm God’s existence but are emotionally affected by this knowledge; they “shudder” (Jas 2:19). Also, Satan’s knowledge of his “short time” leads to his “great wrath” (Rev 12:12) and rage against the nation of Israel, whom John figuratively describes as a woman who has given birth to a male child who will rule the nations (Rev 12:17; cf. v. 5).

Angels also demonstrate rational spontaneity, that is, free will. Angels are ordered to worship God's Son (Heb 1:6) precisely because they have self-determination and the ability to respond positively to such a command. In fact, the cry of "holy, holy, holy" is nothing less than a willed response to God's majesty (Isa 6:3). Satan's (or Lucifer's) fall is likewise a volitional act, demonstrated in the many "I wills" of its recounting (Isa 14:12–15). Further, he displays purpose in his wrathful activities following his expulsion from the second heaven to the earth during the Tribulation (Rev 12:12). Jude 6 speaks of angelic defiance, noting that some "did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode."

Since angels bear the marks of personality, this leads some to suggest that they are created in the image of God, as human personality is (Gen 1:26–27).⁸ However, this does not appear to be the case for at least two reasons: (1) the Bible does not affirm this, and (2) angels do not possess all the marks of the image of God. While the image of God is more appropriately discussed under the doctrine of Anthropology, here it can be said that all conservative theologians agree that it, at minimum, includes personality. In this regard, Old Testament thought uniformly stresses that the human personality is a *unity* of body, soul, and spirit—a unity of the material and immaterial. Disembodied, personal, human existence is simply a foreign concept. As such, when God decided to make man "in Our image" (Gen 1:26) and subsequently "created man in His own image" (v. 27), Adam represents what image bearing means. This indicates that human personality as God's image included the

⁸ E.g., Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil*, p. 32.

body. Therefore, since angels are non-bodied beings, not being human personalities, they do not bear the image of God.

Spirit Beings

Angels are spirit beings; good angels are called “ministering spirits” (Heb 1:4), and bad angels (demons) are termed “evil spirits” (Luke 8:2). As spirits, then, angels have no necessary connection to things that are material; rather, they are incorporeal and immaterial. Jesus affirms this basic fact of spirituality when He says, “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). Similarly, Paul speaks of Christian warfare as “not against flesh and blood” but against “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Angels, as created beings, are finite and are *ultimately* subject to certain time-space-mass limitations. They are powerful, but not omnipotent. Though greater in power than man, they still do not revile the apostates before the Lord (2 Pet 2:11) nor contravene human freedom/responsibility. Though they exceed certain space-mass limitations, they are not omnipresent; rather, they move spatially from one place to another (Dan 9:21–23) and can be confined locally (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 20:1–3). While they have vast intelligence, they are not omniscient (cf. Matt 24:36). Instead, they can and do learn (1 Pet 1:11–12).⁹

Also, while angels are created, finite creatures, their powers and abilities still greatly exceed man’s and should not be underestimated.

⁹ Charles Hodge lists similar limitations: (1) Angels are dependent on God and His sovereign control of all things; (2) Angels act in accordance with the laws of the spiritual and material world; and (he adds) (3) their operations in our order are “occasional and exceptional” (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960], 1:638).

David exclaims that angels are “mighty in strength, who perform [God’s] word, obeying the voice of His word” (Ps 103:20). Likewise, they have “great authority” (Rev 18:1), strength (*ischuron*, Rev 5:2; 10:1) and might (*dunamis*, 2 Thess 1:7). They are able to inflict blindness (Gen 19:10–11), open locked prison doors (Acts 5:17–19; 12:1–11), and even bind Satan himself for a one-thousand year imprisonment (Rev 20:1–2).

Further, despite popular opinion, angelic activity cannot be certainly detected because angelic agents are spiritual beings. As Charles Hodge notes, angelic causation of an event cannot be predicated “if its occurrence admits of any other explanation.”¹⁰ Hodge also cautions against “regard[ing] angels as intervening between us and God, or [attributing] to them the effects which the Bible everywhere refers to the providential agency of God.”¹¹ He says that God uses angels “as He does the winds and lightning (Heb 1:7), and we are not to look to the instruments in the one case more than the other.”¹² Angels are not independent, autonomous forms of providence that can be appealed to; rather, as Strong says, they are “ministers of divine providence.”¹³ In other words, human beings—especially Christians—are not to invoke angelic aid during times of crisis or desperation. Providence is administered solely by God, and angels simply serve at the sovereign pleasure of God their Creator.

And, while invisible and incorporeal spirits, angels sometimes appear in forms similar to human beings, most often, if not always, male human

¹⁰ Ibid., 1:645.

¹¹ Ibid., 1:638.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, p. 443.

beings.¹⁴ For instance, angels appear as men to Abraham in Mamre, announcing the birth of a son to Sarah, as well as the coming destruction of wicked Sodom. They exhibit the actions and characteristics of human beings and were regarded as such. They stand, eat, talk, and otherwise act as fully human beings (Gen 18:1–22). In fact, Lot and the immoral men of Sodom similarly treat these angels as men (Gen 19:1–5). In Ezekiel’s vision of Jerusalem’s destruction, six angels, who are the executioners of that wicked city, appear as men and carry out the divine plan for the sack of the city (Ezek 9:1–10). The angel Gabriel “who looked like a man,” appears to Daniel and gives him understanding of the vision of the ram and male goat (Dan 8:15). Years later, the same angel, now called “the man Gabriel,” gives the great prophecy of the seventy “weeks” (Dan 9:21). The angels at the tomb of the risen Christ appear as “two men in dazzling clothing” (Luke 24:4). And, it was an angel, described as “a young man,” who is inside the tomb and instructs the women who come there (Mark 16:5).¹⁵

In earlier times, beginning with the early church fathers and continuing through the Middle Ages, it was widely held that angels have some kind of ethereal body. That idea, though, is generally out of vogue today; nevertheless, not all are convinced that angels do not have a body of some sort. Lewis S. Chafer, for instance, says, “The Scriptures imply that the angels do have embodiment.”¹⁶ He admits that while spirits have no flesh and blood (Luke 24:39), this does “not imply that a spirit has no

¹⁴ Some suggest that the two-winged women in Zechariah’s night vision are angels (Zech 5:9). If so, this would be the only case where angels were not male in appearance.

¹⁵ In Revelation 21:17 the dimensions of the New Jerusalem are described in “human measurements, which are also angelic measurements,” indicating, again, some kind of juxtaposition between the two, if only in appearance.

¹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), 2:12.

body at all, but, rather, that they do have bodies which in constitution are different from those of men.”¹⁷ Some are less sure; for instance, Donald Campbell says, “As spirit beings [angels] may perhaps possess bodies.”¹⁸

Moral Beings

Originally angels were created by God in a state of goodness, as was the rest of creation (Gen 1:31). Therefore, whatever else is included in the original “domain” or “proper abode” which certain angels “abandoned” and from which they fell, there is clearly the implication that it was a condition of moral purity and holiness. This is because the consequences of such a moral fall included being “kept in eternal bonds of darkness for the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6). Similarly, Satan is described as having once been a holy angel (perhaps of the highest order) but subsequently lapsing, along with other angels (Rev 12:3–4), to a state of eternally-confirmed depravity and irrevocable doom (Rev 20:10).

In fact, the Bible is clear that there are now two distinct divisions of angels according to moral character: good angels (described as “holy,” Matt 25:31; and “elect,” 1 Tim 5:21) and evil angels (described as “angels that sinned,” 2 Pet 2:4; and “angels who did not keep their own domain,” Jude 6). Quite evidently, if some angels are elect, all must have undergone a probation period as did human beings. As Strong says, “If

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ S.v. “Angels,” in Donald Campbell, et al., *The Theological Wordbook* (Waco, TX: Word, 2000), p. 13. A question not infrequently raised is whether angels have wings. Medieval art often pictured angels either as little babies with soft wings on their backs or as strong men with long, powerful wings. Scripture also depicts angelic beings flying (Rev 14:6) and having wings, particularly the cherubim (Ezek 1:5–8) and seraphim (Isa 6:2–3). Still, these two angelic orders are not ordinary angels. What is more, the descriptions of each come from visions, possibly implying that the descriptions are more figurative than literal. And, it is not impossible for creatures to fly even without wings. Therefore, since ordinary angels most likely do not have bodies, they probably do not have wings either (cf. Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil*, pp. 38–39).

certain angels, like certain men, are elect . . . unto obedience, it would seem to follow that there was a period of probation, during which their obedience or disobedience determined their future destiny.”¹⁹

If, however, election means a divine choice of some kind, to what were the elect angels chosen? Since, as discussed above, there is no angelic redeemer or redemption (Heb 2:14–17), this cannot be an election unto salvation from sin. Therefore, it is best to understand angelic election as election unto obedient perseverance in original holiness so as not to participate in Satan’s rebellion.²⁰ Conversely, the evil angels or those not chosen to persevere in original holiness are confirmed in apostasy so that they are incapable of righteousness. As such, their eternal doom is sealed (Matt 25:41). Both good and evil angels are fixed in their moral status.

GOOD ANGELS

Number, Names, and Organization

The number of good angels is practically beyond human calculation. Moses declares that God came to Sinai “from the midst of ten thousand holy ones” (Deut 33:2). David refers to this, saying that “the chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness” (Ps 68:17). Daniel recounts an eschatological

¹⁹ *Systematic Theology*, p. 450.

²⁰ Morton Smith agrees, saying the term *elect* “implies that they received grace to enable them to retain their holy positions, and also to be confirmed in holiness, so that they are not capable of sinning” (*Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. [Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994], 1:200). Berkhof has a similar explanation (*Systematic Theology*, p. 145). Perhaps in this sense, these can be called “angels in heaven” (Matt 18:10; Mark 13:32).

vision where the Ancient of Days has “thousands upon thousands . . . attending Him, and myriads upon myriads . . . standing before Him” (Dan 7:10). The author of Hebrews similarly speaks of “myriads of angels” in God’s presence (Heb 12:22). And John likewise describes “many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands” (Rev 5:11). These together suggest that the number of angels is almost infinite; there is simply no way to count them adequately with temporal mathematics.²¹

Good angels have many names or titles with *angel* (lit. messenger) being one. Other designations include ministers (Ps 104:4), hosts (Pss 103:20–21; 148:2), chariots (Ps 68:17; cf. 2 Kgs 6:16–17; Zech 6:5), sons of the Mighty (Pss 29:1; 89:6), sons of God (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), *Elohim* (Ps 8:5; Heb 2:7), holy ones (Job 5:1; 15:5; Ps 89:6–7; Dan 8:13), and stars (Job 38:7; Rev 12:3–4).

There are also special tiers or echelons in the hierarchy and organization of good angels, but it is difficult if not impossible to be certain of the ranking between them.

Archangel

Michael

Michael is specifically called an archangel and the only one so identified (Jude 9). There is, however, some debate over whether there is more than one archangel. For instance, Daniel 10:13 speaks of Michael as “one” of the chief princes, perhaps implying that there are more. The

²¹ Numbers, in human calculations, are not infinite, despite appearances. In fact, to speak of an infinite number would technically confuse the Creator-creature distinction, because infinity means without number (Ps 147:5) or limitation. This can only be predicated of God (see God’s attribute of “Infinity” in ch. 7).

pseudepigraphal book of Enoch describes Michael as one of several (as many as seven) archangels (9:1; 20:1–7; 40:9). Additionally, Paul says that the voice of the (unnamed) archangel will accompany the Rapture of the church (1 Thess 4:16).

Michael's name means "who is like God?" It speaks of the true and living, incomparable God. Some, in fact, have identified Michael with God or with the Logos of John 1, but both suggestions are in error. Some also think that Michael is the especially-assigned minister in behalf of Israel, particularly in her warfare.²² This appears to be correct since Michael is said to "stand guard over the sons of [Daniel's] people" (Dan 12:1). And, he comes to aid Israel in her celestial struggle with the evil powers warring for Persia (Dan 10:13, 21). This latter instance probably had to do with the conflict between the Jews and the Persian powers as the Jews were attempting to rebuild the temple and city in Judea in the Restoration Period (Ezra 4; Dan 9:25). Daniel prophesies that Michael will come to Israel's aid in the middle of the Tribulation, when the intense and unprecedented persecution of Antichrist, specifically directed against Israel, begins (Dan 12:1). He is also destined to fight the devil and his angels in the second heaven during this same period, a fight which will result in the devil being thrown down to earth, where he will energize the Antichrist in the aforementioned anti-Semitic pogroms (Rev 12:7).

Finally, some suggest that it is Michael's voice which is heard at the church's Rapture (cf. 1 Thess 4:16). However, in light of the fact that Michael's ministry seems especially in behalf of Israel's warfare, it is not clear how he would relate to the Rapture of the church. On the other

²² Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil*, p. 70.

hand, since the Rapture, more or less, begins the Tribulation and its effects on Israel, perhaps this explains his involvement.

Gabriel

Gabriel's name means "mighty one of God." He is not given a specific rank but is possibly another of the rank of "chief princes" (Dan 10:13), assuming Michael is not the only one. Gabriel's duty seems especially theocratic in nature, being a special messenger of things pertaining to Israel's kingdom program.²³ Gabriel interprets Daniel's vision of the ram and male goat which concerned Israel in the intertestamental period and will concern her in the eschaton (Dan 8:15–26). He also comes to Daniel in a time of the prophet's weariness and reveals the prophecy of the seventy "weeks," a divine blueprint of Israel's fortunes extending from Israel's restoration period to the coming of her King and the inauguration of His kingdom (Dan 9:20–27). Further, he appears to Zacharias and announces the birth of John the Baptist, who is the forerunner of the messianic King (Luke 1:8–20). Six months later he announces to Mary her approaching pregnancy and delivery of the King of Israel, along with His role in Israel's and the world's golden age (Luke 1:26–38).

Cherubim

As noted, there is great difficulty with and disagreement over the positions of various special angels in the angelic hierarchy. Strong even suggests that cherubim, seraphim, and the living beings (Rev 4, 5, 7, 19) are not angels at all but rather "symbolic appearances, intended to represent redeemed humanity, endowed with all the creature perfections

²³ Ibid.

lost by the Fall.”²⁴ Chafer suggests that the three are “one and the same general grouping,” the differences owing to service not position.²⁵ Dickason and Showers both say that cherubim are the highest order of angelic beings.²⁶

These cherubim are first found in the post-fall Garden of Eden, where they guarded the path to the tree of life. For whatever reasons, God did not want Adam and Even to eat of the tree after they had sinned, so He expelled them from the Garden of Eden and stationed the cherubim and a “flaming sword” to prevent access to the area (Gen 3:24). There were also two cherubim of gold that stood at the ends of the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle in the wilderness; their wings overarched the mercy seat where God’s theocratic presence (i.e., the Glory Cloud or Shekinah) rested (Exod 25:17–22). In fact, they are called “the cherubim of glory” because of this association with God’s presence on the mercy seat (Heb 9:5). God is, in this regard, said to have been “enthroned above the cherubim” during this period (1 Sam 4:4; Pss 80:1; 99:1). The cherubim were also found woven into the fabric of the tabernacle curtains (Exod 26:1) and the veil that hung between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies (Exod 26:31). In Solomon’s temple there were two cherubim, 15-feet high, made of olive wood and located in the inner sanctuary (1 Kgs 6:23), as well as cherubim carved in the walls (2 Chron 3:7). Similar carvings are found in the description of the millennial temple (Ezek 41:18–20).

²⁴ *Systematic Theology*, p. 449.

²⁵ *Systematic Theology*, 2:17.

²⁶ Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil*, p. 61; Showers, *Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels*, p. 27.

In the end, Dickason is surely right when he suggests that the cherubim are “proclaimers and protectors of God’s glorious presence, His sovereignty, and His holiness.”²⁷

Seraphim

Seraphim are found only in Isaiah 6:1–6. The Hebrew term means “burning ones” (from *saraph*: to burn). This may suggest their consuming devotion to God, or it may indicate that they are afire with the adoration of a holy God.²⁸ Their work is to extol the holiness of God (Isa 6:3, “holy, holy, holy”), which in this context gathers up the twofold idea of God’s moral purity (indicated by Isaiah’s response, v. 5, and cleansing, vv. 6–7) and His majestic transcendence (indicated in Isaiah’s description, v. 1).

Living Creatures

While the “living creatures” of Ezekiel 1:5 (et al.) are classed as cherubim (Ezek 10:20–22), it may be that the similarly named “living creatures” of Revelation are of a different order, particularly because of their different role. These are described as engaged in worship (Rev 4, 5, 7, 19) and as directing the judgments of God during the Tribulation (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7; 15:7; et al.).

Some suggest that these beings are not cherubim but rather seraphim, because each has six wings and each engages in extolling God’s holiness (“holy, holy, holy,” Rev 4:8).²⁹

²⁷ *Angels, Elect and Evil*, p. 63

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67. Also Showers, *Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels*, p. 33.

Ministries

Although angelic ministry is continuous and is found throughout the Bible, their earthly services are usually epochal, such as their service at creation, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the birth of Christ, the ministry of Christ, the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the second coming of Christ and end time events.

Ministry to God

Angels praise and worship God continuously. The hosts of angels are commanded to praise God (Ps 148:2) and to ascribe to Him the glory due to His name (Ps 29:1–2). As noted above, the seraphim constantly extol God’s holiness (Isa 6:1–3), and angels in general rejoice in God’s works (Job 38:6–7). At Christ’s birth, a large number of angels appear praising God with shouts of “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased” (Luke 2:14). This is the common description, as well, of the angels described in Revelation (Rev 4:8–11; 5:13–14; 7:11–12; et al.).

Angels also serve God at all times. David writes, “Bless the Lord, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word! Bless the Lord, all you His hosts, you who serve Him, doing His will” (Ps 103:20–21) in God’s very presence (v. 19). The author of Hebrews simply describes them as “His [God’s] ministers” (Heb 1:7), a word which commonly denotes priestly service, suggesting that they are always conscious of the presence of God, and, thus, their work is always sacred and sanctified to God’s glory.

Angels were agents of God’s revelation. They were, as noted, prominent in giving the Law to Moses at Sinai (Gal 3:19), explaining

in part Israel's respect for and sometimes fascination with them. This particular service is also suggested by Moses when he speaks of how "the Lord came down from Sinai . . . and He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones" (Deut 33:2). David, too, mentions this, saying, "The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness" (Ps 68:17). Similarly, Stephen rebukes the leaders of Israel for being "betrayers and murderers" of those who proclaimed the Messiah, which only compounded their apostasy, because they of all people had "received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it" (Acts 7:53). As well, the author of Hebrews speaks of the Law as "the word spoken through angels" (Heb 2:2).

Further, as agents of revelation, angels play an important role in biblical visions. Daniel, for instance, has his vision of the four beasts explained to him by angels, that is, "one of those who were standing by" (Dan 7:16; cf. vv. 15–27). Similarly, his vision of the ram and male goat, especially its eschatological fulfillment, is also explained by these creatures (Dan 8:15–26). And, it was an angel (Gabriel) that mediated his prophecy of the seventy "weeks" (Dan 9:21). Similar agency mediated his final vision (Dan 10:1–12:13). Likewise John's vision is mediated by an angel. John writes, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John" (Rev 1:1). And at the end of his great prophecy, John again speaks of the angel whom God sent to show him these things (Rev 22:6).

Finally, angels are said to appear before God at certain times in some sort of assembly or council, apparently in heaven. This idea is mentioned twice in Job, described as "a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord" (Job 1:6; 2:1). The scene portrays these

angelic couriers as giving account of their services for God and receiving new orders.³⁰ This scene seems to parallel the psalmist's "assembly of the holy ones" (Ps 89:5) or his "council of the holy ones" (Ps 89:7). And, it is very similar to the angelic convocation in 1 Kings where, in highly anthropomorphic and figurative language, God is described as soliciting counsel from His angels (22:19–23).³¹ These gatherings, however, are not gatherings of peers, where God and His angels collaboratively brainstorm. The Creator-creature distinction is always carefully maintained, even in heaven, and angels are never promoted from their role as God's servants to His colleagues. God, in the end, consults only with Himself.

Ministry to Jesus Christ

Angelic ministry surrounds the earthly life and ministry of Christ, including His ministry to come in the eschaton. An angel (Gabriel) announces His birth to Mary (Luke 1:27–28) and another explains the same to Joseph (Matt 1:18–25). Others proclaim His birth to a group of shepherds (Luke 2:18–25). Angels protect Him from danger, instructing His father to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's madness (Matt 2:13). They strengthen Him in His wilderness temptation (Matt 4:11) and in His heart-wrenching emotional and physical agony in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). An angel rolls the stone away from His grave and announces His resurrection to some women (Matt 28:1). At His ascension, angels predict His visible return (Acts 1:11) and, in fact, will attend that return (Matt 25:31).

³⁰ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 2nd ed., NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 71.

³¹ Some see Genesis 1:26 as describing a similar instance (i.e., "Let Us make man in Our image").

Angels not only serve Christ in many ways, they also worship and adore Him (Heb 1:6). Furthermore, they have an intense desire to understand the atonement and salvation which He accomplished, something seen indirectly in their joy over one repentant sinner (Luke 15:10) and directly in Peter's statement that they "long to look into" the gospel (1 Pet 1:12). Apparently, being sinless and incapable of experiencing the grace of redemption, these good angels are eager to supplement their theology on the subject. That desire is evidently being assuaged, as well, when they behold the manifold wisdom of God and the riches of Christ in forming the church (Eph 3:8–10).

Ministry to the Nations

Angels, in some manner, watch over and control the affairs of nations. For example, certain angelic "watchers" or "holy ones" attend the goings-on of the Neo-Babylonian empire, especially during the Exilic period when God chastens His covenant people for their apostasy (Dan 4:13, 17; cf. v. 23). In this case, Nebuchadnezzar recounts his dream of the high tree to Daniel, and these angelic watchers/holy ones are credited with having delivered the dream. Similarly, during the Persian domination of the Exilic period, Michael steps forward as the prince of Israel to aid the nation's angelic forces against the malevolent angelic powers of the Persian empire (Dan 10:12–21).³² Michael will do the same for Israel in the middle of the Tribulation (Dan 12:1) when the Antichrist

³² Much has been made of "territorial spirits" in light of these evil beings against whom Michael and others fought in some kind of international warfare. It can be noted here that there is no biblical directive for Christians today to try and expel these bad angels before evangelism or missions can be undertaken in those particular places, nor are there instances in the New Testament where this was done. That there is angelic spiritual warfare on a world-wide scale today is evident from Scripture and experience, but such is totally controlled by the sovereign God who foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. And He has not designed nor revealed any exorcism, deliverance, or expulsion techniques.

completes his rise to world domination by defeating a northern coalition in an international showdown (Dan 11:40–45).³³

Ministry to Believers

Angels conduct a wide-ranging service to the children of God under the simple name of “ministering spirits.” The author of Hebrews asks rhetorically, “Are they not all ministering spirits (*leitourgika*: priestly, sacred service), sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (Heb 1:14). David says that saints have angelic protection: “The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear Him” (Ps 34:7). In another place, calling forth an imprecation on his enemies, David says, “Let them be as chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them on. Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them” (Ps 35:5–6). If this is an ordinary angel and not a Christophany (i.e., pre-incarnate appearance of the Son), then it suggests that angels perform a ministry of protection for the saints. Jacob experiences similar protection in his meeting with Esau (Gen 32:1–2), as does Elisha when he was besieged by the Arameans (2 Kgs 6:8–18).

Another ministry of angels to believers is their observance of church activity. Angels are not omnipresent, but their sheer number enables them to be nearly everywhere, and they apparently are in attendance at and are around all local churches. Paul implied as much when he rather sarcastically upbraided the Corinthian church for its arrogance and conceit: “For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men

³³ It is at this time that “Jacob’s distress” begins (Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1), a period also called the “great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal 4:5). This is Israel’s darkest hour and occurs just before the dawn of the golden age of the kingdom of God. It should be noted here that angels will *not* be in charge of the Millennium (Heb 2:5). For the most part, they will be enjoying their well-earned “retirement program,” although they will still be active (Ps 91:11) (See the chart by John C. Whitcomb entitled *The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ Over the Earth* [Winona Lake, IN: Whitcomb Ministries, 1994]).

condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (1 Cor 4:9). Much clearer is Paul's directive that women should wear a symbol of authority in the public assembly of the local church "because of the angels" (1 Cor 11:10). Whatever else this text means, it at least suggests that angels are observing what goes on in the church. Further, Paul also indicates this when he invokes the persons of God, Christ, and the elect angels as witnesses in his charge to Timothy regarding the local church's attitude and activity toward its elders (1 Tim 5:21).

Angels perform several other ministries for believers, some of which are ongoing, some of which are not and some of which are yet future. For instance, an angel answers the prayer of the early church and delivers Peter from prison (Acts 12:5–7). Also, in the Millennium, angels will preserve the citizens from the ordinary hazards of life: "For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, that you do not strike your foot against a stone" (Ps 91:11–12). In the New Testament era, angels actively gave guidance and direction to the saints. For example, angels instruct (1) Zacharias concerning the birth of his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:11–19); (2) Philip the evangelist to go on a certain road and there meet the eunuch from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26); (3) Cornelius to send to Joppa for Peter (Acts 10:1–8); and (4) Paul regarding his safe passage to Rome (Acts 27:23–24). Further, angels also apparently accompany believers to heaven at death, as is indicated in the case of Lazarus's escort to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). And, angels will gather the elect Jews out of the earth at the second advent of Christ to set up His kingdom (Matt 24:31).

Do Believers Have Guardian Angels?

Many have suggested that every believer has a special guardian angel, a suggestion largely based on Matthew 18:10, which speaks of children's angels, and Acts 12:15, which speaks of Peter's angel. During the intertestamental period, Jewish tradition was, at times, preoccupied with angelic beings, a preoccupation which was full of superstition and which would later raise the concerns of the early church (Col 2:18). Included in this speculation was the idea of guardian angels, something the apocryphal book of Tobit appears to allude to when Tobit says, "Do not worry; our child will leave in good health and return to us in good health. . . . For a good angel will accompany him; his journey will be successful, and he will come back in good health" (5:21–22 [NRSV]).

Roman Catholic theology also puts an emphasis on personal guardian angels. Ludwig Ott, a Roman Catholic theologian, developed the idea of guardian angels under the rubric: "Every one of the faith has his own special guardian angel from baptism."³⁴ This he then broadens to include "every human being, including unbelievers," whom, he says, "[have their] own guardian angel from . . . birth."³⁵ Other Roman Catholic literature says the same. For instance, one writer says that a guardian angel is "a celestial spirit assigned by God to watch over an individual during life. . . . The role of the guardian spirit is both to guide and to guard; to guide as a messenger of God's will to our minds, and guard as an instrument of God's goodness in protecting us from evil."³⁶

³⁴ *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch, ed. James Canon Bastible (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1954), p. 120.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Ott cites Matthew 18:10, Acts 12:15, and the Saints Basil, Gregory and Jerome for support. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), par. 336.

³⁶ John A. Hardon, S. J., *Pocket Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 175.

Still, the idea of a guardian angel has no sure biblical foundation. B. B. Warfield, for instance, notes that a “guardian” is always to be with his ward, something not true of Peter’s supposed guardian angel, who would have been far removed from Peter if he had shown up at the believers’ door and Peter had been en route to heaven.³⁷ Hodge says that “the language [of Acts 12] . . . is not of an inspired person, but of an uneducated servant [Rhoda], and can have no didactic authority. It only goes to prove that the Jews of that day believed in spiritual apparitions.”³⁸ While Hodge is mistaken in limiting the report to Rhoda alone, his analysis is otherwise well taken. And, though he holds that children have guardian angels, saying that “angels watch over their welfare” (cf. Matt 18:10), Hodge notes that “this does not prove that each child or each believer, has his own guardian angel.”³⁹ In short, while believers have any number of angels as their servants (Heb 1:14), there is not any sure support that each believer has a guardian angel.

Ministry to Unbelievers

Good angels also serve God by carrying out His plan concerning the unbelieving. For instance, the Lord’s angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in answer to Hezekiah’s prayer (2 Kgs 19:35; 2 Chron 32:21), and His angel struck down Herod for his presumptuous self-will and arrogance (Acts 12:23). Further, angels will gather up unbelieving pretenders (i.e., tares/weeds) and consign them to perdition when the

³⁷ “The Angels of Christ’s ‘Little Ones,’” *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed., John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), 1:256. Amazingly, Warfield adopts a disembodied-spirit view of the children of Matthew 18:10 and of Peter in Acts 12:15. However, at least the appearance of Peter was obviously not in a disembodied state.

³⁸ *Systematic Theology*, 1:640.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

kingdom of God is set up on earth (Matt 13:30, 40–42). And they will announce and participate in the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of the Tribulation (Rev 8–16).

SATAN

As with angels, critics of biblical Christianity deny the reality of Satan, considering him a personification of bad influences or part of the left-over remnants of pagan religions that were adopted into the Hebrew religion. These views notwithstanding, Satan exists and is a real person, not to mention there is even value in studying him, among which are the following.⁴⁰ For one, such a study enables Christians to know their enemy and learn how to combat him. That is, it is helpful to know that he appears as an angel of light, a roaring lion, or a tempter, to name a few. Second, it properly cautions believers against underestimating their foe, for Satan is an evil genius, whose intelligence and cunning far exceed that of any believer. This should, at the least, cause believers to be biblically scrupulous in dealing with him. Third, this sort of study also prevents believers from the extreme pessimism of philosophical dualism because, while exceptionally crafty, Satan is nevertheless a created, finite being, absolutely inferior to God and destined for destruction. In other words, he is no match for God.

⁴⁰ These reasons reflect material taken from Alva J. McClain, "The Doctrine of Satan" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

The Names of Satan

There are numerous names and titles given to Satan in Scripture and each denotes some characteristic or activity of his. He is called *Satan* 52 times, a name which means to *oppose* or be an *adversary*. Examples of such are his opposition to Israel, which leads him to incite David to number the nation of Israel in an illicit census (1 Chron 21:1). Similarly, in Zechariah, Satan, standing oppositely the high priest Joshua, accuses him before Yahweh's angel (Zech 3:1). Likewise, Jesus speaks of Satan's desire to "sift" Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31–32).

He is also called *the devil* (*diabolos*) some 35 times, a name meaning *slanderer* (from *diaballo*: "to bring charges with hostile intent, either falsely . . . or justly").⁴¹ In Revelation 12:9–10 he is called the devil because he slanders the saints before God day and night (cf. also Rev 20:2).

Satan is called *Beelzebub* (or *Beelzebub*, Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), who is described as "the ruler of the demons" (Matt 12:24; cf. 9:34). The name undoubtedly comes from the Old Testament Philistine god of Ekron, Baalzebub (2 Kgs 1:2). *Ba'al* means *lord*, *owner*, or *master*. The meaning and origin of *zebub* is not as easily discerned. Apparently *zebub* referred to a fly or a poisonous insect, worshipped by the Canaanites, that allegedly would give an oracle through its buzzing or flying. Some, in fact, suggest that Baalzebub "protected his worshipers from plagues of flies."⁴² Others suggest that that name comes from Beelzebub meaning "lord of the house," but it was changed by the Jews, in contempt, to refer instead

⁴¹ BDAG, s.v. "*diaballo*," p. 226.

⁴² *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Baal-zebub," 1:241.

to an insect, *zebub*.⁴³ Another suggestion is that by the time of the New Testament the name had become *Beelzebub*, from the Syriac which means “lord of dung,” which the Jews then applied to Satan, since it was a common practice “to apply the names of the gods of enemy nations to the devils of one’s own religion.”⁴⁴ Whatever the derivation or original meaning of zebub (or zebul), the designation stood for Satan as the head of the organized host of evil, angelic powers.

Another name given to Satan is *Belial* (2 Cor 6:15). The derivation of this title is also uncertain, though the idiom “sons of Belial” (Deut 13:13) is usually understood as meaning worthless or wicked. Taken in this sense, Satan would then be thought of as embodying all that is bereft of genuine worth and moral goodness.

He is also called *the deceiver* (Rev 12:9). This is his life-long occupation, and continues until he is bound in the abyss for the thousand years where he cannot deceive (Rev 20:3). After the thousand years, he will be released for a short while, a time which he will immediately seize to deceive an untold multitude into following him to their (and his) final doom (Rev 20:7–8).

Further titles include: (1) the serpent (2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9), which harkens back to the Garden episode when Satan energized a snake and deceived Eve into sin; (2) the tempter (Matt 4:3; cf. 1 Thess 3:5), because he solicits all whom he can to evil and disobedience to God; (3) the evil one (John 17:15; 1 John 2:14; 5:18); (4) prince of this world (*kosmos*, John 12:31); (5) god of this world (*aion*, 2 Cor 4:4)⁴⁵; (6) the prince of the

⁴³ EDT, s.v. “Baal-zebub,” by J. J. Scott, Jr., p. 126.

⁴⁴ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. “Baal-zebub,” 1:241.

⁴⁵ The difference between these two Greek words—*kosmos* and *aion*—is probably negligible in these cases. Both represent the time-space-mass continuum organized in opposition to God and righteousness in every respect, and Satan is the chief executive officer

power of the air (Eph 2:2), the air representing the space above the earth and below heaven,⁴⁶ a realm which is occupied by demons ever since their expulsion from the third heaven where God dwells (2 Cor 12:2, 4); and (7) the dragon (Rev 12, 13, 16, 20), evidently a huge creature borrowed from Old Testament thought (e.g., Gen 1:21; Job 7:12) and which conjured up ideas of monstrous size, strength, and possibly, brutality.

The Origin of Satan

Originally Satan was created as a holy angel, apparently occupying the highest position among the angels. From this lofty position, he fell and incurred the condemnation of relentless, eternal punishment and divine retribution (1 Tim 3:6, “the condemnation of the devil”; i.e., the kind of condemnation Satan fell into).

Isaiah 14:1–20

There is a difference of opinion, even among dispensational premillennialists, over whether this passage refers to (1) a historical king of Babylon; (2) to a future, eschatological king of Babylon—the Antichrist of the Tribulation; (3) to this future, eschatological king of Babylon *and* to the energizing power of Satan behind him; or (4) to several referents, including all these mentioned previously.

To begin with, multiple fulfillment is ruled out because of the univocal nature of language which requires that a word have but one meaning in one usage and that this meaning is determined by the

of this organization and its acknowledged god.

⁴⁶ Homer Kent, Jr., *Ephesians: The Glory of the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), p. 34.

author's intent. Further, the first suggestion is also ruled out because the description does not fit any historical king of Babylon. In fact, it does not appear possible for some of the descriptions to refer to a human being at all, thus ruling out the second suggestion as well. Therefore, the third suggestion accounts best for the context and language of the text, as will be demonstrated.

The context of Isaiah 14 is eschatological, pointing to a time when Yahweh will again move to fulfill Israel's national election, settle her in her own land, and make her the head nation of the world. Even other nations will attach themselves to Israel as servants (Isa 14:1). The perspective of the account is one in which Israel looks back over the Tribulation, from which she has just emerged, and takes up a taunt (*mashal*) against her greatest enemy ever—the Antichrist, the eschatological king of Babylon. In recounting this taunt of the Babylonian king, the prophetic description briefly turns to a parenthetical matter—the energizer of this eschatological king, Satan (vv. 12–14)—before returning to the original subject matter (v. 15).

Specific arguments in favor of this reading include the following:

1. The context described in verses 1–4 is eschatological, referring to Israel's millennial kingdom-rest and final triumph over all her enemies.
2. The Babylon described here is eschatological, which is supported by the following: (a) Eschatological texts indicate there will be a future eschatological Babylon whose king will be the Antichrist (Rev 13; 17:11–13); (b) the Babylon described here (Isa 13:1–14:32) is said to fall in the eschatological Day of the Lord (13:6, 9); (c) this fall is described as occurring by fire,

similar to Sodom and Gomorrah's, and as *permanently* destroying Babylon (v. 20), descriptions not analogous to anything in Babylon's history thus far (including, e.g., Babylon's overthrow by Cyrus in 539 B.C.)⁴⁷; and (d) this fall parallels the eschatological fall described in Revelation (Rev 14:8; 16:9; 18).

3. Other passages indicate that Satan does indeed influence agents to the extent that the biblical address is directed to him personally through the energized agent. Instances of this include the serpent (Gen 3:14–15) and Peter (Matt 16:22–23).⁴⁸
4. The language of Isaiah 14:12–14 seems inappropriate if applied to a human being, including Belshazzar, the last king of the neo-Babylonian empire (whose defeat led to Israel's return from Exile), but it is appropriate when applied to an extraordinary creature such as Satan.⁴⁹
5. The “star of the morning” (v. 12) could indicate that Satan ruled over other angels who are elsewhere called *stars* (cf. Job 38:7).

⁴⁷ It is also suggested by some, e.g., John Martin, that the reference is to Babylon's destruction by Sennacherib (689 B.C.) when the city, already an Assyrian vassal state, rebelled under the leadership of Mushezib-Marduk. Martin suggests that Israel's taunt is then directed at Sennacherib, who would have been considered king of this vassal state and who was assassinated some eight years later (2 Kgs 19:37) (“Isaiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983–1985], 1:1060–61). This is unlikely in part because (1) there is no record of Israel ever making such a taunt, and (2) there is no record that the Babylonians became Israel's servants as depicted in Isaiah 14:2 and elsewhere in Isaiah (60:4–7, 10–14; 61:5; 66:19–21) and by other prophets (Zeph 3:10; Hag 2:7–9).

⁴⁸ Christ did call Judas Iscariot a devil (John 6:70); however this is not directly parallel since the address is not made directly to Satan. Further, Grudem suggests that Psalm 45 is another example of moving from a description of an earthly king to a description of someone else, in this case, the Messiah (*Systematic Theology*, p. 413).

⁴⁹ While Grudem thinks Isaiah 14 refers to a human, earthly king, he does believe that vv. 12–15 contain language “too strong to refer to any *merely* [emphasis added] human king” (ibid.).

6. The fall of Satan from the second heaven *to the earth* in the middle of the Tribulation corresponds with the apex of the three-and-one-half year rise of the Antichrist to world power⁵⁰ and status as Israel's worst tyrant and persecutor ever (Isa 14:12; cf. Rev 12:9; 13:1ff.). As such, Isaiah's perspective in this parenthetical section moves from Satan's original expulsion from the third heaven to the second heaven *and* to his eschatological expulsion from the second heaven to earth at the middle of the Tribulation. In other words, Isaiah sees the two events in one grand sweep.

Ezekiel 28:1–19

Much the same argument made in Isaiah 14 can be made in this text. Verses 1–10 refer to a human king⁵¹ and verses 11–19 refer to the one who energizes him. And, again, there are several items in this second section which are difficult to apply to a human being: (1) the individual's "seal of perfection" and "perfection of beauty" (v. 12); (2) his presence in "Eden, the garden of God" (v. 13)⁵²; and (3) his previous status as "the anointed cherub who covers" (which is a reference to the cherubim who covered the mercy seat in the holy of holies [Exod

⁵⁰ The antichrist begins his world rise as a "little horn," a rather insignificant power in the end-time coalition of ten kings (Dan 7:8–27). And, he eventually becomes the international king by the middle of the Tribulation. His battle with the "king of the north" (Dan 11:40–45) leaves him with no political rivals, as well as consolidates his economic (Rev 13:16–18), military (Rev 13:4, 7), and religious (Rev 13:8) domination. It is at this point that he institutes a series of perfidious acts, including his breaking of his treaty with Israel, an act which leads to a three-and-one-half year nightmare for Israel.

⁵¹ Some suggest that the human king was the prince of Tyre, while others suggest it is the eschatological Antichrist.

⁵² It is difficult to say whether this is a reference to the original Garden or the third heaven; nevertheless, either location rules out a purely human referent.

25:17–22] and to the cherubim’s general ministry of guarding the holy presence of God). Coupled with these are two further, circumstantial pieces of evidence, which seem to point to Satan: (1) The individual was previously “blameless,” a state which began at his creation and lasted until unrighteousness was found in him (28:15), and (2) his downfall was caused by pride (v. 17), closely tying him to similar descriptions of Satan’s fall on account of pride (1 Tim 3:6; also Isa 14:13–14 [“I will” (5x)]).

The Personality of Satan

In the Bible, Satan is always regarded and treated as a real person, contra critical thought that has relegated him to the realm of the symbolic, figurative, and mythical. The Old Testament writers assume and assert his personal existence without formal proofs (Gen 3⁵³; 1 Chron 21:1; Job 1:6⁵⁴; et al.). And every New Testament writer mentions him as well. What is more, of the 29 references to him in the gospels, 25 come from Christ Himself.

Personal Pronouns, Qualities, and Responsibilities

Personal pronouns are used in the Bible when referring to Satan. For instance, the Lord addressed Satan as “you” (Job 1:6–12). Paul speaks of Satan disguising “himself” as an angel of light, along with “his” servants (2 Cor 11:14–15). James likewise promised that if believers resist Satan, “*he* will flee” (Jas 4:7).

⁵³ Granted, Satan is nowhere explicitly named in this event. Still, no literal interpreter since Adam suggested that it was only a snake with whom Eve conversed.

⁵⁴ The references to Satan in Job are particularly clear concerning his personality. Only a personal being—not a state of mind or a myth of folklore—could do the things done to Job and predicated of Satan.

Also, Satan is described as having personal qualities. Specifically, he is described as having intellect (Rev 12:12, he knows he has a short time), emotion (Rev 12:12, he is capable of great wrath) and volition (Isa 14:13–14, “I will” [5x]).

Further, Satan is treated as one who is responsible for his attitudes and actions. Non-personal beings are not similarly accountable. For instance, as the “ruler of this world” Satan has already been judged (John 16:11) and sentenced (Matt 25:41), presupposing that he knows the moral law of God, is capable of decisions and actions in the moral realm, and is liable for the penal consequences of wrong decisions and actions.

The Career of Satan

Satan’s career can generally be summed up in the following six stages.

1. He began his existence as a holy angel on the “holy mountain” of God (Ezek 28:14), the third heaven where God dwells.
2. From the third heaven he was cast into the second heaven because of sin (Rev 12:3–4); he is now the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2). This is the present abode of Satan and his angels, from which they have rather free access to earth, though still under God’s control (Job 1:7; 1 Pet 5:8), and limited access to God’s presence (Job 1:6; 2:1).
3. Satan will be thrown down to the earth from the second heaven in the middle of the Tribulation (Rev 12:7–9; cf. Dan 12:1), where he will bring untold hardship and bloodshed to earth-dwellers during the last half of the Tribulation.

4. After the Tribulation Satan will be bound in the abyss for one thousand years (Rev 20:1–3). His angels will also be bound with him during this period (cf. Zech 13:2; Isa 24:21–22).⁵⁵
5. Satan will be allowed out of the abyss at the end of the Millennium to go back on the earth and deceive the nations—a last, suicidal attempt to dethrone God and the saints (Rev 20:7–9).
6. Satan will be finally cast into the lake of fire to endure the wrath of God and eternal punishment with his angels, the beast and false prophet, and all humans who follow him (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10; 21:8).

The Work of Satan

The activity of Satan is virtually non-stop. What follows is an abbreviated list of his works which will give some idea of his activity. Satan slanders God and opposes God's plan beginning in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:4–5). He slanders and opposes the nation of Israel (Zech 3:1–2; Rev 12:1–6, 13–17) as well as other believers (Rev 12:10). He counterfeits God and God's work, reinventing himself as an angel of light when it suits his purposes (2 Cor 11:14–15). Satan sows tares among believers (Rev 2:10). He tempts people to sin. For instance, he tempted Cain to kill Abel (1 John 3:12), Israel's leadership to kill Jesus (John 8:40–44), and Judas to betray Christ (Luke 22:3–6; John 6:70–71; 13:2). He tempts people to lie (John 8:44; Rev 3:9). He harasses believers (1 Cor 12:7) and tempts them also to sin (1 Cor 7:5). He will deceive the

⁵⁵ Zechariah speaks of the removal of a generic "unclean spirit" during this time and Isaiah speaks of the internment of these creatures for "many days," ostensibly an oblique reference to the Millennium of Revelation 20. This is the only Old Testament text that puts the Millennium between the Tribulation and the final judgment.

nations and cause them to gather for the great Battle of Armageddon (Rev 16:12–16). He will deceive the nations again after he is released from the abyss after the Millennium (Rev 20:3). He takes the word of God from hearers so that they are not saved (Matt 13:19) and otherwise blinds the minds of all unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4). He will empower the man of sin (2 Thess 2:9; Rev 13:4), the Antichrist (i.e., the one who is *against* Christ),⁵⁶ who will be his greatest specimen of human apostasy. This one “opposes [*antikeimenos*: an opponent, someone hostile] and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship” (2 Thess 2:4). He is antagonistic to Christ in every possible way he can be.

EVIL ANGELS/DEMONS

The Origin of Evil Angels

The thought of origin here is not concerned with these beings’ creation, which was, as noted, in the opening moments of Day 1 of the creation week. Rather, the concern is with their origin as morally evil. Of the various theories suggested,⁵⁷ the fallen angel view is the best and most widely-held position among conservative theologians. In fact, it has been called “the substantial Scriptural view.”⁵⁸ This position says simply

⁵⁶ The Greek preposition *anti* can also mean *in the stead of* in the sense of substitution: antichrist will usurp the role and prerogatives of Christ (2 Thess 2:4). *Anti* as well can mean *in the stead of* in the sense of imitation: antichrist will be a counterfeit Christ (2 Thess 2:9–11). It is difficult to know which is intended in the word antichrist. Perhaps the significance is composite.

⁵⁷ For a synopsis of the various views, see Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil*, pp. 155–58.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

that demons are fallen, evil angels, and thus they are personal beings as are the rest of the angels.

That demons are personal beings is supported by the following:

1. Demons are angels and, thus, personal beings. This is proved, first, by Jesus' assertion that Gehenna (hell, the lake of fire) was prepared for Satan and his angels (Matt 25:41; cf. Rev 12:7). In other places, the devil is said to be the ruler of demons (Matt 12:24; Rev 9:11). These indicate that Satan is the ruler of a multitude of demonic, angelic hosts.
2. Demons are called spirits, and, thus, are personal beings. In Matthew 18:16, Jesus casts "spirits" out of a *demon*-possessed man. In another place, the Seventy rejoice that the demons are subject to them. To their excitement, Jesus responds, saying, "Do not rejoice . . . that the *spirits* are subject to you" (Luke 10:17, 20).
3. Demonic activity parallels that of angelic beings, especially Satan, suggesting, again their personality. For instance, both demons and Satan can enter and possess people (Matt 17:14–18; cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:37).

Demonic activity, while quite prevalent in the gospels, is first noted in the Old Testament, specifically tracing back to pre-Mosaic times when Israel was in Egypt. In fact, there are several ways in which the Old Testament refers to demons. One word often used is *se'irim*, variously translated as goat demons, hairy ones, hairy goats, shaggy goats, and satyrs. (A *sa'ir* is a male goat and is the word used regularly of the animals used for the sin offerings.) In one place the Lord specifically forbids the worship of these, saying, "They shall no longer sacrifice their sacrifices to the goat demons with which they play the harlot" (Lev 17:7). Jeroboam

1, the apostate, first king of the northern kingdom of Israel is said to have “set up priests of his own for the high places, for the satyrs and for the calves which he had made” (2 Chron 11:15). Interestingly, in the Millennium there will apparently be areas (i.e., Babylon and Edom) where *se‘irim* and other demons will be confined (Isa 13:21; 34:14).

Another Old Testament designation of demons is *shedim*, a word possibly from *shud*, which means *to rule, be lord, or be a mighty one*. It could also be from *shadad*, meaning *to destroy, devastate, or ruin*. The *shedim* are said to be the real spiritual influences behind idols and idol sacrifices, giving them energy and power over people (cf. 1 Cor 10:20). Moses recounts Israel’s participation in this apostate worship as he nears the end of the wilderness sojourn and his own life, saying, “They sacrificed to demons who were not gods, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread” (Deut 32:17). Israel even went so far as to sacrifice their children to these wicked powers when they offered them to the idols of Canaan (Ps 106:36–38).

There are other descriptions of demons in the Old Testament. The *Lilith*, translated night monster in its only usage (Isa 34:14), apparently was a female demon of the night. The word comes from *layelah*, which means *night* and was used in contemporary cultures for a demonic creature of the night. It has been suggested that what was simply a night animal in Israel (e.g., bat, owl, etc.) was “demonized” by the animistic pagan nations surrounding Israel.⁵⁹ Similarly, the evil spirits confined to Babylon and Edom (modern day Bozrah) during the Millennium are described as owls, ostriches, hyenas, jackals, wolves, tree snakes, and hawks (Isa 13:21–22; 34:13–15). When John describes Babylon during this time, he speaks of

⁵⁹ TWOT, s.v. “*Lilith*,” by Walter C. Kaiser, 1:479.

it as the “dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird” (Rev 18:2).⁶⁰

The Organization of Evil Angels

It is clear that the demons have a very efficient distribution of responsibilities. In fact, they are well organized to carry out their nefarious tasks. There are numerous designations in this division of labor, though it is not quite possible to put these divisions into a hierarchical order. Paul speaks of this order, referring to (1) angels and principalities (Rom 8:38); (2) rule, authority, power, and dominion (Eph 1:21); (3) rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10); (4) rulers, powers, world forces of this darkness, and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12); (5) thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities (Col 1:16; 2:10, 15). Similarly, Peter and Jude speak of (1) angels, authorities, and powers (1 Pet 3:22) and (2) angelic majesties (2 Pet 2:10; Jude 8).⁶¹

The Work of Evil Angels

The activity of demons is prodigious and, like Satan’s work, is seemingly continuous everywhere. It must be remembered that demonic activity is permitted and controlled absolutely by the sovereign and omnipotent God of the Bible. For instance, God allowed Satan and his forces to

⁶⁰ Babylon and Bozrah apparently will be museums where demons can in some manner be observed during the Millennium as show pieces of what happened to those who followed Satan (and Antichrist). These showcases will also serve as visual aids to millennial inhabitants admonishing them not to yield to their own depravity and rebel outwardly, at least, against the messianic King during the world’s golden age.

⁶¹ The reference to “angelic majesties” is either a direct reference to fallen angels or it at least includes them.

interfere with Job's life (Job 1:11–12; 2:6). Further, God allows the sinning saint to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the sinner's flesh, in instances of church discipline (1 Cor 5:5). God also allowed Paul to have a thorn in the flesh, called "a messenger of Satan," which tormented him and kept him from self-exaltation (2 Cor 12:7). Now, whether these incidents are truly the work of evil angels or Satan singularly is debatable, though not entirely important theologically since the work of demons is parallel to Satan's work and is simply an extension of his power.

Evil angels oppose the people of God to whatever extent possible.⁶² They are the principalities and powers against whom believers are engaged in spiritual battle constantly (Eph 6:10–18). But, in the end, the forces of darkness will not prevail because the saints "overwhelmingly conquer" them through Christ (Rom 8:37–39). Evil angels also oppose the work of good angels, as seen in the warfare between the angels in behalf of Israel and the fallen powers fighting for Persia (Dan 10:13, 20). Further, evil angels can enter and control the bodies of human beings and animals (Mark 5:8–13) and in so doing can inflict physical maladies (Mark 9:17, muteness; 9:25, deafness) and moral impurity (Mark 5:2, uncleanness). They may even work physical miracles as did Pharaoh's magicians (Exod 7:8–22; 2 Tim 3:8). Further, evil angels can also bring about false doctrine and false worship (1 Tim 4:1). In fact, pagan idol worship is associated with demonic influence (Lev 17:17; 1 Cor 10:19–21; Rev 9:20), something the covenant people sadly trafficked in all too

⁶² Another interesting example is found in 1 Kings where an elder, Yahweh-prophet gives a false message to a younger prophet, one which eventually results in the latter's doom (1 Kgs 13). The prophet tells the younger prophet: "I also am a prophet like you, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord," something the narrative follows with "but he lied to him" (1 Kgs 13:18). It can be argued that the "angel" who delivered the message was a fallen angel sent to frustrate the purpose of God, which purpose included the younger prophet's message against Jeroboam 1 and his godless administration—a warning which predicted coming judgment on the false cult centers at Dan and Bethel.

often (Deut 32:16–17). In short, these evil angels, as Satan's angels (Matt 25:41; Rev 12:7; cf. Matt 9:34; 12:24; Eph 2:2) fully support their master's manifold work.

New Testament Outbreak of Demonic Activity

There was a virtual explosion of demonic and satanic activity in the gospels such as does not appear to have happened before or after the 1st century. Some demur, however, suggesting that conditions today are essentially the same. Timothy Warner, for example, expresses this belief, saying, "Nothing has changed since the days of Jesus when it comes to demonic activity affecting the human body and human life in general."⁶³ Of course, if this were true, then ministries of exorcism and deliverance would also necessarily remain operative. This will be dealt with shortly. Still, it is very difficult to sustain the idea that demonism is as overt, public, and confrontational in the present day as in the days of Christ. And, if it is not, then what explains the outbreak of the 1st century? Three answers are given. First, Merrill Unger says,

The power of a sinless humanity called forth special satanic temptation of our Lord (Matt. 4:1–11). The full glow of light manifested in the earthly life of him who was "the light of the world" (John 8:12) exposed the darkness of the powers of evil. This is the explanation of the unprecedented outburst of demonism described in the Gospel narratives.⁶⁴

Second, Hodge points even closer to the crux of the matter, saying,

⁶³ *Spiritual Warfare: Victory over the Powers of This Dark World* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1991), p. 43.

⁶⁴ EDT, s.v. "Satan," p. 1055.

The world, since the apostasy, belongs to the kingdom of Satan; and to redeem it from his dominion was the special object of the mission of the Son of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that the time of his advent, was Satan's hour; the time when, to a greater degree than before or after, he manifested his power, thus making the fact of his overthrow the more conspicuous and glorious.⁶⁵

Third, Alex Konya, along the same line as Hodge, but developing a correct dispensational understanding of Christ and His 1st century message, notes that the Lord's miracles were kingdom related signs attesting to His power and authority as king in the kingdom He was offering to Israel. The exorcisms were actually miracles of healing, demonstrating that Satan's kingdom was being invaded as preparation for the coming of the Messiah's earthly kingdom, as prophesied in the Old Testament. These clashes between Satan's kingdom and the advance preliminaries of Christ's kingdom explain the unusual number of exorcisms in Jesus' day.⁶⁶

Further, miraculous response to the demonic outbreak gave a sample of what kingdom living would be like. Exorcisms, in this case, demonstrated that Satan and his demons would be completely bound and expelled from the earth for the duration of the kingdom (Zech 13:2; Rev 20:1–3). This would free human life from the burden of outward solicitations to sin by the devil and his henchmen. Other miracles had similar kingdom-pedagogical value. The healing miracles signified that in the Messiah's kingdom there would be the elimination of disease and

⁶⁵ *Systematic Theology*, 1:646.

⁶⁶ *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1991), p. 49.

physical deformity (Isa 33:24; 35:5–6), not to mention the virtual abolition of death (Isa 65:20, 22). The feeding of the multitudes demonstrated the provision of abundant food and productivity in the kingdom (Isa 35:1–2; Amos 9:13). The miraculous catches of fish and the incident of the tax money in the fish's mouth both pointed to the enjoyment of economic security that will prevail in the kingdom age (Isa 65:23), among many other things.⁶⁷ In other words, the kingdom would see a complete sanctification of human existence: "Every need of humanity will be anticipated and provided for . . . no legitimate aspect of human life will be left without the regal saving activity."⁶⁸ The Lord's miracles were a foretaste of the common blissful life in His coming earthly reign, including relief from the overt work of Satan and his wicked emissaries.

Demon Possession

The Concept

Demon possession comes from the Greek word *daimonidzomai*, which means *demonized* or *controlled by a demon*. The common understanding has been that the word means "possessed by a demon."⁶⁹ Some prefer a softer expression since, these claim, there is not a Greek word specifically for *possession* and since the New Testament speaks of different degrees of demonic influence.⁷⁰ Still, it does seem that *daimonidzomai* bears the weight of possession, unless one was previously committed to such a theory of degrees. Furthermore, the use of the word suggests two key

⁶⁷ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 299–300.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁶⁹ BDAG, s.v. "*daimonidzomai*," p. 209.

⁷⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 423. Unger agrees, suggesting that *daimonidzomai* admits of a latitude or degrees of demonic invasion, such as mild, moderate, and severe (*What Demons Can Do to Saints* [Chicago: Moody, 1991], pp. 98, 111, 125).

ideas: “The demon can exercise control and dominion over the victim that apparently cannot be successfully resisted, and it indwells him.”⁷¹ Demonized then means completely controlled, victimized and indwelt by one or more demons, that is, to be demon possessed.

The simple verb form *daimonidzomai* occurs only in Matthew 15:32, but the participial form occurs 12 times in the New Testament (Matt 4:24; 8:16, 28, 33, et al.). There are other expressions for demon possession, such as someone “with an unclean spirit” (Mark 1:23–26), one “having” [*echonta*] a spirit which caused the victim all manner of havoc (Mark 9:17, 18, 20, 22) or those “afflicted with unclean spirits” (Acts 5:16).

The Characteristics

The concept of demonization is closely tied to its perceived characteristics. Those who see latitude in the extent of demonic influence on a person tend also to see demonic power in contexts where it is not at all clear that actual demons are at work. Or, if there is a Satanic or demonic presence, the assumption is drawn that the person is demonized in one of varying degrees. Unger understands, correctly, that there is a hierarchy of some kind among Satan and his angels, but from this he infers, incorrectly it seems, that the extent and nature of demonic control depends on the power and depravity of the demons and the number and extent of their influence.⁷² In a case of “mild” invasion, for instance, “demons of lesser rank and power are involved.”⁷³ Further, John’s command to “test

⁷¹ Konya, *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective*, p. 22.

⁷² *What Demons Can Do to Saints?* p. 117. In cases of moderate and severe demonization, he adds some human factors that enter in: “Heredity, environment, upbringing, the degree to which the moral Law of God has been violated, complicity with sins of the flesh and spirit, and occult participation are only a few of them” (p. 125).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 115. He gives Acts 8:7 (demons coming with loud shouts out of many in Samaria) and Luke 4:41 (demons shouting that Christ was the Son of God) as examples (p. 118).

the spirits" (1 John 4:1) is taken to imply that false doctrine is the most common form of mild demonization among genuine Christians.⁷⁴ This is then linked to the "different gospel" Paul warns the Corinthians about (2 Cor 11:3–4) and to the (demonic) "spirit" that had given false information to the Thessalonians concerning the Day of the Lord (2 Thess 2:2).⁷⁵ Cases of moderate and severe demonization are said to include: (1) the chastening of believers (1 Cor 5:5; 1 John 5:16); (2) Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11); (3) the saints at Thyatira (Rev 2:20–24); (4) Hymenaeus and Alexander (Rom 2:24; Titus 2:5); (5) Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim 2:16–18); (6) Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim 4:14–15); and (7) the legalizing Jewish believers of Smyrna (Rev 3:7–13).⁷⁶

However, looking at all these contexts, it seems that (1) some are not really mild cases at all; (2) in others the spirits do not refer to demons; and (3) in others the assumption that references to Satan must refer to demonic activity in individuals must be questioned.⁷⁷ Therefore, while there may be degrees of demonic influence in various New Testament cases, the biblical idea of *daimonidzomai* and its synonyms seem to entail a special, irresistible evil control that produced such peculiar behavior that all could identify as demonic.

Further, in discussing the characteristics of demon possession, it must be understood that, biblically and theologically speaking, such

⁷⁴ *What Demons Can Do to Saints?* p. 118.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–40.

⁷⁷ Grudem likewise suggests that statements such as the following indicate some form of demonization: (1) Perpetual sinners are "children of the devil" (1 John 3:10); (2) Esau was "of the evil one" (1 John 3:12); (3) the world is lying in the power of "the evil one" (1 John 5:19); and (4) Satan is the "ruler of this world" (John 14:30), "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4), and "the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:2) (*Systematic Theology*, p. 422). While he is not willing to say all sin involves the devil or demonic influence, Grudem does say that "demonic activity is probably a factor in almost all sin and almost all destructive activity that opposes the work of God in the world today" (p. 420).

possession must be differentiated from actual *consortion* with demons. Spiritism or sorcery in its various Old Testament forms meant deliberate trafficking with the demon world (Isa 8:20), and this was a capital offense with no mercy under the Mosaic Law (Lev 20:27; Deut 18:10–27). But, in the New Testament, demon possession is treated with mercy and relief by Christ (Matt 4:24).⁷⁸ The victim in these cases was an object of compassion and pity. This does not mean that the victim was not guilty or culpable. Rather, there is still some sort of complicity, though not as if the victim had been deliberately consorting with demons.

Another characteristic of demon possession is that a person may be victimized by one or more demons. The demons tell Christ on one occasion that their number was legion (Mark 5:9). While a Roman legion totaled around six-thousand soldiers, one wonders if an exact number is intended or if the reference is simply to an extraordinarily large number of demons. Mary Magdalene had seven demons expelled from her (Luke 8:2), and Jesus speaks of the wandering unclean spirit who takes seven others with him in indwelling a person (Matt 12:45).

What is more, demon possession entails such influence that there is a virtual intermingling of egos between the evil spirit and his victim. In the gospel accounts, therefore, there is an interchange of pronouns attributed to the same demonized individual. In one instance of demon-possession, the text says that the possessed man says, “Let us alone. . . . Have you come to destroy us?” (Luke 4:34). Following this, Jesus responds by rebuking him (the demon) and commanding him to come out of the man. Similarly, in the case of the man possessed with the “legion” of demons, the text describes the man crying out to Jesus, “What business

⁷⁸ Alva J. McClain, “The Doctrine of Demons” (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment *me!*" (Mark 5:7).

It also involves diverse, but detrimental physical effects. For instance, on one occasion, demons caused mental disturbances (Mark 5:15, "in his right mind"). On other occasions, demons caused muteness (Matt 9:32), blindness (Matt 12:22), moral impurity (Mark 5:2), and superhuman strength (Mark 5:4). In one case, demons caused what seems to be epilepsy (Matt 17:14–18).

Of course, not every case of mental disorder or physical impairment is demon-energized, though such was the case in many occurrences. Rather, there is a clear distinction in Scripture between demonization and natural physical disorders, between demonic takeover and simple sickness. In Capernaum, for example, the Lord "cast out the spirits with a word" as well as "healed all who were ill" (Matt 8:16; cf. Mark 1:32–34). Likewise He gave the Twelve "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness" (Matt 10:1; cf. Mark 6:7–13).

Konya lists three main characteristics which help to precisely identify cases of demonic possession: (1) a combination of symptoms of extreme physical distress; (2) the obvious presence of another coherent personality able to speak and understand; and (3) clairvoyance or the possession of supernatural knowledge, especially spiritual matters.⁷⁹ Kurt Koch suggests four: (1) voice alteration; (2) clairvoyance; (3) speaking in a foreign language; and (4) occult transference.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective*, pp. 112–13.

⁸⁰ *Demonology Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973), pp. 42–46. Later in the book, Koch expands this list to eight (pp. 136–41). Grudem provides his own criteria, comprising (1) bizarre behavior, (2) false doctrine, and (3) a Christian's subjective sense of Satan's presence (*Systematic Theology*, 425–27). See also Unger's criteria in *Demons in the World Today*, pp. 177–203.

The Christian and Demon Possession

A perennial question in this area is whether or not Christians can be demon possessed. Dickason leans toward the possibility but says a definite conclusion is impossible.⁸¹ Koch thinks it is possible.⁸² Merrill Unger, as noted earlier, originally held that Christians could not be possessed only to later switch positions on the basis of testimonies from various mission fields.⁸³ His revised position espoused that regenerated people could have demons “indwelling” them and that believers could be “repossessed.”⁸⁴ In his last book on the subject, Unger seems to equivocate between Christians being possessed, oppressed, invaded, controlled, influenced, afflicted, and entered by demons.⁸⁵ Grudem suggests that Christians cannot be possessed if possession entails the complete domination of the will, but he does hold that a believer “may come under demonic attack from time to time in a mild or more strong sense.”⁸⁶

The correct and more common view is that Christians cannot be possessed in the sense of the word *daimonidzomai*. This is true for the following four reasons.

1. The believer has new life in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if Spirit indwelling means anything, it should mean that Christians cannot be victimized, indwelt, and/or

⁸¹ *Angels, Elect and Evil*, pp. 188–92; see also his *Demon Possession and the Christian: A New Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), p. 147. Similarly vague is Showers who takes no position on the issue, *Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels*, pp. 144–47.

⁸² *Occult Bondage and Deliverance*, pp. 67ff.; see also his *Demon Possession Past and Present* in which he combines biblical and anecdotal evidence of demon possession, including that of believers.

⁸³ Cf. *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press, 1957) with *Demons in the World Today* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971), pp. 117, 186.

⁸⁴ *Demons in the World Today*, p. 184.

⁸⁵ *What Demons Can Do to Saints*.

⁸⁶ *Systematic Theology*, p. 424.

possessed by demons. John seems to conclusively say this when speaking of false teachers in the lineage of the Antichrist who bring a “spirit” of false doctrine. He asserts, “You [believers] are from God . . . and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Likewise, believers are God’s temple. Thus, God promises that He “will dwell in them and walk among them; and . . . will be their God, and they shall be [His] people” (2 Cor 6:16). In short, while Satan and his minions unceasingly attempt to assail believers, it is unthinkable that they could come in and possess, control, or victimize the saints with the apparent benign acquiescence of the indwelling God.

2. The believer also has the guarding protection and preservation of the Son of God. As John says, “We know that no one who is born of God sins [i.e., habitually sins; present tense]; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18). Of course, no Christian can live without sin or without being attacked from Satan. Still, the believer here is promised that he will not be overcome by the devil and his forces. John’s verb for “touch” is *haptō*, which denotes *to take hold of*,⁸⁷ not a mere superficial encounter but rather a *fastening on*⁸⁸ or *overpowering* encounter. What John means is that Satan cannot *finally* overtake and possess the believer. Further, the believer is described as one “born of God,” a state of continuing eternal life (perfect passive of *gennaō*); as such, he cannot practice sin

⁸⁷ BDAG, s.v. “*haptō*,” p. 130.

⁸⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), p. 538.

(present tense of *hamartano*). The reason for this is the keeping power of another who has also been born of God in a similar, though infinitely greater, sense.

3. Satan has been defeated through the cross work of Jesus Christ.⁸⁹ This guarantees that a believer is forever freed from Satanic control and victimization. Jesus Himself, in view of His coming death, pronounced this defeat, saying, “Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31). Paul similarly speaks of Christ’s “disarm[ing] the rulers and authorities . . . [and] ma[king] public display of them, having triumphed over them through” the cross (Col 2:15). Christ, by His infinite atonement for sin forever broke the hold of evil angels⁹⁰ on those who have been forgiven. In another place, Christ’s death is said to have rendered the devil “powerless” (Heb 2:14). Further, the believer’s union with Christ via the baptism of the Holy Spirit assures him that the merit and validity of the Savior’s infinite and eternal cross work is forever efficacious against any hostile takeover attempt by Satan or any of His angels. The believer’s position of being in Christ, of being already judicially-seated in the heavenly places with Christ (Eph 2:6), makes Satan’s attempts to successfully dominate him futile.
4. Demon possession requires complicity. Strong observes that “the power of evil spirits over men is not independent of the human will. This power cannot be exercised without at least the original

⁸⁹ EDBT, s.v. “Demon,” by A. Scott Moreau, p. 165.

⁹⁰ So F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 110–11.

consent of the human will.”⁹¹ For instance, when Satan desired to afflict Peter, it was within Peter’s power to pray for help in resisting the temptation (Luke 22:31, 40). Similarly, the expelled and wandering unclean spirit in Mark is said to be “seeking rest,” perhaps implying that he is looking for someone hospitable to his homeless plight (Matt 12:43). As such, the complicity would approximate an active availability for or exposure to demonic takeover. And, a true, Spirit-indwelt believer could not participate in such drastic accessibility. Granted, a Christian may be harassed by Satan and demons due to moral failure or willful sinning, but this sort of harassment is not coterminous with demonization. For example, Satan had filled Ananias’s heart to lie to the Spirit regarding the proceeds of his land sale. But, it is also said that Ananias had already conceived this in his heart. In fact, Ananias is described as having control over his actions during the entire affair (Acts 5:3–4). His satanic attack was preventable.⁹²

Demon Possession in the New Testament Epistles and Today

In the gospels the cases of demon possession were clearly and immediately recognized by Christ and the apostles and many others, including unbelievers (Mark 7:24–30; 9:14–29; Matt 17:14–21). The incidents of demon expulsion in Acts, while fewer in number, were also clear (Acts 5:12–16; 8:7; 16:16–18; 19:11–19). When it comes to the epistles,

⁹¹ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 457–58.

⁹² Similarly, a Christian’s persistent sin may necessitate his own discipline by the church, a discipline in which he is put into the realm of Satan to be buffeted (1 Cor 5:3–5), a realm free from the fellowship of believers and the ministry of good angels (Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 457). For a true believer, such discipline brings restoration to church fellowship, not complicity with the Satanic harassment.

it is then surprising not to find any special criteria or tests for determining cases of demon possession. Granted, some do suggest that the gift of discerning the spirits (1 Cor 12:10) does provide a means for determining cases of such. In fact, these suggest that the gift gives one the ability to distinguish intuitively and directly between the working of the Holy Spirit and evil spirits in someone's life.⁹³ However, the gift appears to operate in the realm of objective doctrine rather than subjective personal experience. In the Corinthian context, the gift appears to be related to judging prophecies in the 1st century assembly (1 Cor 14:29). This gift seems to give one the ability to discern the ramifications and wider implications of a particular teaching and to make a judgment whether such a teaching is true or false—from God or from the devil. Of course other texts suggest this is the responsibility of every believer (1 Thess 5:19–21; 1 John 4:1–4); nevertheless, those with this gift simply have a unique ability in this area.

What is also surprising is the complete absence of teaching in the epistles on demon possession. To be sure, believers are instructed how to handle Satan's attacks, but demon possession itself receives no mention. So while Ephesus was a site of great occult traffic and Paul's ministry there included many exorcisms (Acts 19:11–22), Paul's epistle to that church says nothing of such works. This lack of direct teaching should give significant pause to the development of elaborate schemes for demonic and satanic deliverance.

In the end, the only real, fundamental provision for the Christian in his warfare with the powers of darkness is *resistance*, something both James and Peter admonish (Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8–9). And, Paul explains the principal means for such resistance as the Christian's armor, armor which

⁹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 425–27; Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, p. 98.

is *defensive* in purpose (Eph 6:10–20).⁹⁴ In short, the Christian has all he needs in Christ for warfare and triumph in these battles and, as such, he is not to “give the devil an opportunity” (Eph 4:27).

The believer is never instructed to go looking for Satan and demons. In fact, the epistles suggest that they will come looking for him (1 Pet 5:8).⁹⁵ Neither are believers instructed to bind, expel, or be aggressive toward Satan. He is much too powerful for them. Believers have no delegated authority for such actions, except that given to the apostles as sign gifts authenticating their launch of the church (cf. 2 Cor 12:12). Believers are not even to “rebuke” Satan; after all, not even the archangel Michael dared to speak this way (Jude 9). Rather, he left such speech to God. Similarly, Paul, instead of rebuking Satan for his thorn in the flesh, prayed for God’s intervention (2 Cor 12:8).

Some demur, suggesting that Christ has indeed given believers authority to rebuke demons.⁹⁶ Evidence for this is drawn from a handful of passages, including those describing the sending of the Twelve (Luke 9:1; Matt 10:5) and the Seventy (Luke 10:19) and the work of other apostles (e.g., Philip, Acts 8:7; Paul, Acts 16:18). This evidence from the Gospels and Acts is precarious, if not corroborated from the epistles’ teaching. That is to say, what the apostles did is not tantamount to what can and must be done presently. For instance, in the case of the Seventy, they were to go ahead of Christ “to every city and place where He Himself was going to [go]” in His final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 10:1). Similarly,

⁹⁴ Even the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is a defensive tool, being a small dagger for parrying an enemy’s blows, not the typical broad sword for offensive battle (A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in vol. 11 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], p. 89). Further, Paul too explicitly exhorts resistance (“resist,” v. 13; “stand firm,” vv. 13–14; cf. respectively, BDAG, s.vv. “*antibistemi*,” p. 80 and “*bistemi*,” p. 483).

⁹⁵ Konya, *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective*, p. 103.

⁹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 427.

many activities of the Twelve are also not practiced today, e.g., healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, taking no money or extra clothing, announcing the impending but not established messianic kingdom, and making this announcement *only* to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5–6).⁹⁷ In other words, the Gospels and Acts are precarious foundations because they recount a period in which massive theological change is occurring, as God’s plan shifts focus from Israel to the church as a result of Israel’s rejection of Christ’s offer of the kingdom.

This discussion naturally leads to the matter of detecting and responding to demon possession today. While Scripture does not say that demon possession cannot (nor does not) happen today, there are no criteria given for a sure identification were possession to occur, nor, for that matter, specific instruction concerning a response. As such, demon possession can only be strongly *suspected* in cases for which no other cause (physical or psychological) is forthcoming. And, in such cases several avenues of response are available, regardless of the severity of the case.⁹⁸ First, the Christian can pray for the power of Christ to intervene and give resolution and relief. And, since Christ alone has such power, the Christian must not command, talk to, or in any way, dialogue with demons. Second, in cases where a Christian is experiencing unusual opposition from the powers of darkness, he should reflect on the nature of sin and his need for continual repentance and should renew his focus on employing the armor of God so that he might resist the attack. Finally, in every case, all occult objects should be destroyed.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ It must be remembered, as well, that some of these instructions were later rescinded (cf. Luke 22:35–36; Matt 28:19).

⁹⁸ Konya, *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective*, p. 114.

⁹⁹ This is especially the case if any of the objects is associated with previous demonic presence, whether via spiritism, sorcery or the black arts in general. Granted, while most of these practices are hokum, there may be residual Satanic power lurking in such objects.

In all of the Christian's struggles with Satan and his evil servant angels, ultimate victory is promised to the believer, even though, at times, the conflict may be intense and prolonged. In fact, every Christian has the assurance (1) that Satan is a foe who has already been judged by Christ's cross work (John 16:11); (2) that the devil and his hosts have thereby been rendered powerless in the final analysis (Heb 2:14); (3) that no angelic creature can separate him from the (electing and preserving) love of Christ (Rom 8:37–38); and (4) that Satan's tenure and access to earth will be over soon, relatively speaking (Rev 12:12).

The Judgment of Evil Angels

Scripture says that certain evil angels, because of some sin, are already confined in the abyss (Luke 8:31; cf. Rev 9:1–11), “pits of darkness” (i.e., *tartarus*, 2 Pet 2:4), or “eternal bonds” (Jude 6),¹⁰⁰ awaiting their final judgment. Eventually, all evil angels will be judged “at the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6), and all will be consigned finally to the eternal lake of fire, God's everlasting prison house for all criminals, rebels, and renegades against His holiness (Matt 25:41).

¹⁰⁰ The difference in the description of the location (and the conditions) of each is probably inconsequential.

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ROLLAND McCUNE

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OF BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY



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